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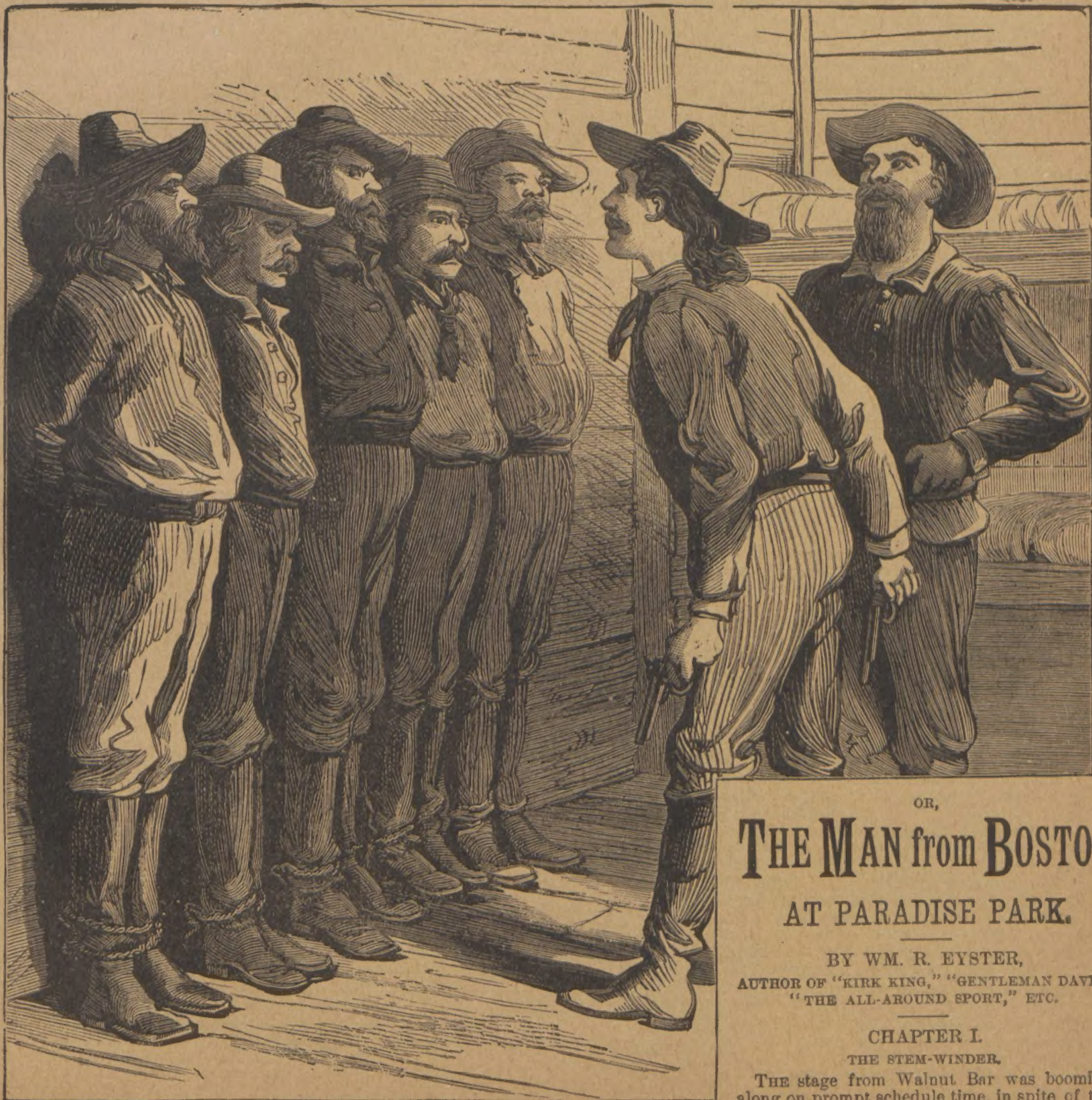
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THE FRISCO SPORT;



OR,

THE MAN from BOSTON AT PARADISE PARK.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "KIRK KING," "GENTLEMAN DAVE,"
"THE ALL-AROUND SPORT," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE STEM-WINDER.

THE stage from Walnut Bar was booming
along on prompt schedule time, in spite of the
fact that it was "loaded to the muzzle."

"NO BACK TALK. I MEAN BUSINESS WITH A BIG B."

That was the way Black Charley expressed it at the last station, and he seemed to have hit the fact of the case as closely as he could hope to in default of any other language than English "as she is spoke" on the frontier stage trails.

Fortunately the load was largely taken on at that same station, being principally composed of passengers set down there by a coach from Bunco, which, at that point, crossed the trail to the new diggings.

It was a great misfortune the Bunco coach could not take its load straight through; but when the contract for carrying the mails from Bunco to Red Bend was taken, the diggings on the other side of the mountain had not been heard of, and no one could expect there was to be a rush in that direction, which should not only send every available vehicle thitherward, freighted down with adventurous spirits, but in a week or two line the trail with several thousand pedestrians.

Black Charley was not black at all; but, being of a dark complexion, was so called to distinguish him from another Charley who handled the ribbons on the same line.

This trip Charley had been rather more anxious than at any other time since the first day over the route. For the only time since the rush began he had a lady passenger.

And in his mind there was no mistaking the fact that she was a lady.

She was handsome, to begin with, though not quite as young as she had been. What her age might be was more than he had determined, though he would not have been surprised to hear she was on the shady side of thirty.

Nor would he have wondered if it had been proved to him she was barely twenty. He didn't care anything about her age; she was good-looking, and when she spoke to him it was with a deference showing him she was neither bold nor timid, though travelling practically alone.

She had an escort, to be sure, but to Charley this scarcely counted. He was fashionably dressed, had long hair, and spoke with a drawl and a stutter.

A young man without weapons or "get-up" about him was in the wrong pew the minute he got the other side of Bunco, and it seemed like sending a lamb to the slaughter for her to take such a youngster down to the new diggings.

Charley was sorry for both passengers, but principally for the lady, since he felt sure she would soon be without any protector at all. If he could have seen any way to have introduced the subject without appearing obtrusive, he would have recommended her to turn right around and go back when he saw her step out to take her place in his "hearse."

And what under the sun were they to do when they got down to Paradise Point?

He gave a groan when he thought of the two stepping out at Coalhill Cal's, and asking for a "soot" of rooms. He wondered who would be called upon to administer on their effects.

Those same effects were reposing in the hind boot, much to the wonder of not only Black Charley, but of some of the other passengers.

The way of it was this:

Bob Watt, who kept station at this junction, was something of an autocrat, and at the same time had an eye to the main chance.

It happened there were several boxes of supplies which he expected to send to Paradise in that same boot, and as there was money in it for himself, he informed Mrs. Mowrey that her trunks would have to remain over and take their chance.

Naturally, she made objection, and even offered to pay something extra, but looked hopeless when Bob explained to her the facts in the case.

"Sorry, mum, but it are this hyer way: Thar's jest a load without 'em, an' ef we take 'em some un's got ter be left. I ain't a pickin' out ther man ez are ter stay behind; an' I don't think you, ner yer young man, are wantin' ther job. Ef you kin persuade him, I'm sirene on

it; but you kin see fur yerself thet thar's a load without 'em, an' I'm only dog-gone glad thet I kin make room fur you."

"But I paid my way through, and they assured Harold there would be no trouble about the luggage. Why, sir, it has cost me more from Bunco down than it did across the whole continent! I demand that you send the trunks with me. If it is not done you shall be reported on my return."

At this awful threat Bob shrugged his shoulders and tried to suppress a grin.

"Sorry, mum, ef yer thinks I ain't bin givin' yer a square deal; but I can't help it. Git aboard, mum, an' I'll try an' have 'em over to-morrer, sure."

"No, sir; I will not get aboard until I see my luggage properly placed, also. If there were not sufficient accommodations they should have sent an extra coach."

"Very true, mum; but yer sees they didn't. Ef yer stays hyer ter-night I'm afeared I can't promise yer ez good a show to-morrer."

Mrs. Mowrey wrung her hands, and there was some interest being excited. If it had been a man Bob would have slammed to the door and given Charley his orders to blaze away, but he was not altogether certain whether it would be advisable with a lady. He hesitated, and while so doing was lost.

"What's the trouble, madam?" was asked, in a sharp, crisp voice, and, looking up, Watt saw a man on horseback.

He was a good-looking man, dressed like a sport. He was a stranger to him, at any rate.

Mrs. Mowrey was not slow in telling what was the matter, and the stranger accepted the information without the least change of countenance, or evidence that he was listening through more than polite curiosity.

"Jerk out those boxes and put in the trunks!"

When she was through he turned to Watt with a friendly smile, and it was rather a suggestion than an order.

"Who the thunder be you?" snarled the station agent, diving down for his gun after the fashion that was more for show than business. He did not take much stock in the stranger, anyhow.

As his fingers touched the butt of his revolver the hand of the stranger flew up, though it seemed to move carelessly enough. There was a little shoot of flame, a report, and Bob Watt fell as though he was shot. In fact, he was shot!

"Dump those boxes and get the trunks in, some of you!" continued the shooter, a second revolver appearing.

"You don't want any nonsense over the job, either. If it's not done in thirty seconds by the clock I'll commence to fill that hearse as full of holes as a skimmer. Step back a moment, madam, while I arrange this little matter. It looks as though they might start out with a short cargo, yet."

Mrs. Mowrey stepped back in a hurry, and her attendant went with her. They expected to see some lively times, for half the passengers carried their belts full of arms, while the other half had them within reach, though they might be concealed by the skirts of their coats.

But there was no trouble at all. Some one appeared to recognize the gentleman who had taken upon himself to regulate matters, and called out:

"Say! ain't you Stenwinder Saul?"

"Currently reported that I fit a title something like it, but that's nothing here nor there. Ah! glad to see men of sense. Hop in, madam! And you, Black Charley, let her roll!"

Mrs. Mowrey delayed no longer, for she had seen her trunks hustled into the boot; and at the order Charley brought his lash down harder than he knew.

The horses dashed away, and Saul turned to the three or four loungers who, having been more specially menaced by his pistols, had done the work of transposition.

"Look after that blamed fool a little. There's no great harm done, and the next time he'll know better than try one of his snide games with a woman."

And, thrusting his pistols away, the man went cantering off in the direction taken by the stage.

In the coach the passengers on the front seat looked curiously at the lady who had found such a ready champion. If it had not been delicate ground to tread on, they would have asked her if the gentleman was a friend, or only a chance acquaintance.

Mrs. Mowrey was as much perplexed as any of them; while the young man, who was trying to play escort, and who had maintained a judicious silence during the late unpleasantness, turned to the other passengers for explanation.

"Surely that was the most—the—the stwangest thing. Who is Stenwinder Saul, and why has he such a remarkable name?"

"It was remarkable, for a fact," answered the person on whom the speaker's eyes happened to rest.

"Never knew him to draw iron before without leaving at least three corpses behind when he went away. Wonder if he didn't just clean up things when Charley got out of sight. It wouldn't have been the thing to have begun to slaughter when there was a lady around."

"But, weally, he seemed to have made a fair beginning. There was at least one dead man on the gwass."

"Dead, nothing! Didn't you hear him warble? Only creased the fool; but it won't be healthy for Bob to put on frills again when Saul is around. He has given him fair warning."

"Oweased him?" echoed the young man, a look of puzzled wonder on his face, and utterly unheeding a warning touch of the elbow given by the lady at his side.

"Stunned him, if that suits you any better. Shot just too close to miss him, and not so close as to do any damage. Bob will be up and around by this time, thanking his lucky stars that Saul didn't play fer keeps."

"Aw!"

With that exclamation of wonder the young man relapsed into silence.

His informant, who was the person who had originally recognized the man on horseback, continued, however, giving some general information.

"Bad man is Saul, when you stroke his fur the wrong way; but not a bad sort when the cards run right. Kin be just the worst old pill I ever did see, and I've seen 'em all. Reckon he's going down to Paradise to spread his little layout. He'll make things red hot when he gets there!"

"Hush!" whispered a cautious man, "There he is now!"

With a clatter of hoofs a magnificent horse swept by, and on his back was Stenwinder Saul. Mrs. Mowrey leaned forward and gazed at him through the coach window. When he had fairly passed he turned somewhat in his saddle, and, seeing her, gracefully touched his hat. Then he drew away as though the stage was stationary.

CHAPTER II.

CAPTAIN HURT'S TOLL-GATE.

The coach met with no mishaps until it had reached a point not more than a mile or so from the limits of the camp, and a sharp eye could have perhaps detected the rising smoke which announced the hour for supper was near at hand.

Charley was coming around Bootleg Bend with a careless swing, and the passengers were beginning to congratulate themselves they had made the turn without damage or danger, when a sharp voice arose above the rattle of the wheels.

"Down brakes and up hands! We want to examine your cargo."

"Road-agents, by mighty!" gasped Charley, as he kicked the brake-bar over and drew on the lines with an upward motion, which brought the team gradually to a halt.

"Han's are up, but you must be a chump. You tackle ther hearse when she goes out an' you'll git four times ez much an' not half ser much danger."

"You think, but I'm not so sure of it. Tell better when we know how the thing turns out. There's nothing like playing your hand for all it's worth. No telling if you'll get a better one on the next deal. Steady, inside, gents, till this gang gets off the roof. Come down, gents, one at a time!"

The gents on the roof had a better chance to see what was the matter than those within, and they did not hesitate. They could see the muzzles of three or four Winchesters aimed in their direction, and understood the situation. They climbed off and took up a position in line along the road where they were still comfortably in range, and with their hands well up.

"Now, you inside; one by one, and don't waste time about it! In one rank, fall in! The lady and her escort will keep their seats till the last. No harm intended. Only short evening services, and a chance to pass around the collection bag. If the end of the pole hits you in the eye it will be your own fault."

Harold Mowrey seemed to be able to comprehend the situation as well as the most experienced, though he stared around in apparent bewilderment.

"Wh-wh-why d-d-don't some one shoot?" was his question, spoken incautiously loud, and with rather more of the stutter than he generally displayed.

"Dry up, sonny!" warned the man, who was stepping out.

"That's just what we're afraid of. He seems to me in a mighty good humor this evening, but if he did begin, the top of the old hearse wouldn't begin to hold the stiff, and that would make it mighty uncomfortable inside."

"Now, Harold, you can assist your sister out," continued the master of ceremonies.

"Escort her to the head of the line, and be certain you don't leave any of your portables behind you. They might not be there when you took your seats again. My men are the best fellows in the world, but, I am sorry to say, not strictly honest."

Several of the passengers grinned at this.

Their wealth happened to be little, and, like their predecessors, whom Horace spoke of, they could afford to sing in the presence of the robber—provided the robber would let them.

Then the captain stepped forward jauntily, accompanied by two of his men.

They were all masked, and the captain was in addition covered with a long horseman's cloak, which completely disguised his figure. All along there had been a peculiar twang to his voice, which told that it too was disguised.

The rifle barrels a few paces off never wavered, and consequently the delay which followed was slight.

One after another dropped his contribution into the hat, the person making the offering being permitted to take down one of his hands for the purpose. As the other outlaw superintended the operation with a cocked revolver, there was little danger the victim would draw a pistol instead of a purse.

"Now, Harold, what can you do for the poor heathen?" asked the captain, as at last the collectors reached him—for they had begun at the other end of the line.

"N-n-not much; but, weally, I w-w-would like to know how you are aware of my name?"

"Bless my soul, what a question! Do you suppose a young man of your style and influence could come to the Pacific Slope without his name being noised abroad from Dan to Beersheba? But that is nothing, here nor there. Shell out!"

One thing can be said for the young man. He did not appear frightened. He placed his hand in his pocket, and then very deliberately drew out his purse, which was reasonably heavy, to judge from appearances.

"Y-y-you will be disappointed, aw! Nothing but beastly silver."

He tossed it into the hat, which was al-

ready pretty full, and thrust up his hand again with an air of disgust.

"And now, Maid Marion. I know your contribution will scarcely be more than a temporary inconvenience. If it is necessary I will indorse your credit at Paradise to any reasonable amount. Your purse, if you please."

Mrs. Mowrey said nothing, but acted in a manner that looked as though it might be purely mechanical.

Her eyes were fixed steadily on the captain, and as her hand dropped her purse into the hat she seemed hardly conscious she was parting with wealth.

"Very satisfactory, indeed!" said the leader of the outlaws, surveying the plunder.

"Now, deacon, if you will just take a glance through the vehicle, the congregation will be dismissed."

The glance was in reality a pretty thorough search, though there was nothing to show that any find rewarded it.

"Watch out, now, when I give the order, and Charley won't be much late, after all. My love to the boys at Paradise, and give out that services have commenced on this trail with Captain Hurt in command. All aboard!"

The passengers scrambled once more into the coach, the road-agents melted away in some unnoticed manner, Black Charley cracked his whip, and again the wheels went 'round.

"Purty squar' sort ov a feller," sighed one passenger, as he drew a handful of coin from another pocket.

"Left me a grub stake, an' axed no questions. Reckon he did fur ther most ov us."

The passengers took the whole thing as a matter of course, and even Marion Mowrey made no moan, though her full lips closed a little tighter as she heard this. So far as she was concerned, the outlaw had left her nothing at all in the line of coin; and at Paradise, with scarcely a woman in its borders, it was doubtful whether her property was available as collateral.

"Seemed ter hev' us all down fine, an' I reckon he had a peep at ther waybill—er one ov his frien's hed fur him. That's ther right way ter kerry on bizzness, an' ef I ain't mistook he'll be a ornament ter this hyer trail."

"B-b-but do they always know the name of everybody?" asked Harold Mowrey. "I'm n-n-ew t-t-to this sort of thing, don't you know?"

"Them that be reg'lar perfeshionals does," responded the pilgrim addressed.

Harold asked nothing more, but sucked anxiously at the cane he had fished up from the floor of the coach, and appeared absorbed in deep thought. He took no part in the conversation which followed between the other passengers; and Marion was as silent. In another ten minutes the coach was rolling through Paradise.

That camp was a sight to behold.

One would hardly have believed the town could have sprung up so suddenly as it had done, and everywhere it said mushroom on the face of it.

It was largely a canvas city as to its roofs, and for the most part as to its walls. Here and there was a pretentious log building; and fate, in the shape of a long and convenient ridge, had decreed that "dug outs" should be plenty.

The more Mrs. Mowrey looked, the more dissatisfied became her face. She was, for the first time, in a mining camp, pure and simple, which had been evolved from a late rush; and she began to see it was no place for a lady. She had expected slender accommodations, but when the stage drew up with a whirl at Eden Hotel, the principal establishment of the town, she was altogether dismayed.

There was a cook stove in plain sight, on which slabs of bacon were hissing, and coffee was bubbling. Over it was a sort of temporary roof, but walls, save on one side, there were none.

That single side was part of the wall of one of the tents which composed the main part of the hotel; and they were not very regular walls, either.

The canvas had been nailed to various

poles, stuck up as occasion required, and it was exceedingly doubtful if it would offer much protection from a storm—though there was little chance there would be anything of the kind for the next few months.

Old man Rahter, who owned and ran this unique establishment, knew more about its possibilities than did Mrs. Mowrey, and looked upon himself as in very comfortable circumstances now, and a coming millionaire in the near future. He swung open the coach door with a flourish.

"All oud for the Eden Hotel!"

"Is this the best place to stop?" asked Marion, hesitatingly, of the man opposite to her, who was already rising.

"So reported down our way. An' I reckon, so fur ez you're concerned, it's ther only one. You oughter know yer own bizzness, but a rush camp are like ter be a hard old hole, an' you want ter look a leetle out. Old man Rahter are honest, but I ain't sure ef he'll keef fur custom onless he kin see ther color ov yer coin."

Marion gave a little exclamation of dismay. It was possible she might be turned away, even from such accommodations as these.

"Takes money ter buy land hyer, an' after them services up ther gulch I ain't too flush; but, meanin' no disrespek, I kin lend yer a slug, jest ter make a show ov fer a day er two, tell yer kin look round, er send back fer more."

"Thanks, oh, thanks!" replied Marion, in the same guarded whisper. The man was rough looking, but the offer was apparently honestly meant, and was respectfully made. Before she had time to say more he was out and helping her down, while he was speaking to Rahter over his shoulder.

"Maybe we're crowdin' yer, ole man, but you'll hev' ter do ther best yer kin. Hump yerself, an' make it comfortable fur a female in ther Garden of Eden."

CHAPTER III.

CHANCE FRIENDS.

"Is dot you, Mynheer Brimrose? I vos glat to seen you vell, undt the young vom-an vos velcoom, dough it vos not mooch ov a blace. Idt vill pe petter py und py. Valk in!"

"Shake, ole man! Glad ter see yer hev'n't furgot old times. Do the best you kin for her, an' I reckon she won't suffer. This young man kin russel fur hisself, but he belongs to ther same gang. Grub about ready?"

"Shoost a minnit; shoost a minnit! Shtep right in."

One or two other passengers had hesitatingly crawled out, and looked longingly at the hotel. In spite of its uncertain school of architecture, there was something very attractive in the place to a hungry man.

One of them began a conversation sotto voce with old man Rahter, while the party calling himself Brimrose was overseeing the unloading of the trunks. When that was attended to, he preceded Mrs. Mowrey, ushering her into the canvas hotel. He had never seen the institution before, but it did not take much genius for such things to understand the intricacies of the establishment.

"What for Himmel he dinks I runs mit dis blace for?" Rahter was grumbling, as he came hurrying in after his guests.

"Ef dey vos all like you, Meester Brimrose, der road-agendts vouldt not make so glean sweep. Eh?"

"Skassly," answered the traveler, as he allowed a handful of coin in his pantaloons pocket to clink musically.

"Must—must we pay in advance, and what are your terms by the week?" asked Mrs. Mowrey, speaking anxiously, and holding out her hand so that the gold coin in it could be fairly seen.

"I am a stranger to this sort of work, and everything looks very horrible, but I am sure there can be no better place for me in the town, and I suppose I will remain with you while I stay."

"Dot ish all right!" assured the landlord, waving back the hand of Marion,

and then proceeding to scratch his head confusedly.

"A friendt ov Meester Brimrose ish a friendt of mine, but it ish a quesdion v'ere I am to put you. D'ere ish blendy to eat, but beds ish skeerce."

"Don't worry 'bout me, daddy. Yer know I kin bunk arywhar'. But we got ter find room fur ther lady."

"Dot ish so; but how in Himmel!"

"Who's got yer best room? That's the only thing ter consider. P'int him out, an' I'll hev' ter shoot him afore bedtime. Reckon you'll be sharp enough ter git a week in advance afore that, with sich a warnin'."

"Dot might vork, Meester Brimrose, but it's reesky, all der same. It's der chap dey calls Stemwinder Saul. Der man dot gits ahead ov him shall get oup awful early in der morning."

"That's so, Rahter; better give me one what's a leetle easier. An' yet, I dunno. Met ther chap on ther road. He's quick with ther tools, but I ain't sure but w'ot he's got in ther habit ov shootin' a shade high. S'pose yer put her in thar an' run ther reesk."

Primrose spoke in the most matter-of-fact sort of way, and it was difficult to believe he was not altogether in earnest.

Mrs. Mowrey seemed to think he was, at all events.

"Oh, no, no! How can you talk so? What can you think of me? I would sooner sleep in the coach all night, go back to Walnut in the morning, and leave my mission unfinished."

"Good scheme that, but it wouldn't wu'k. Betcher three ter one thar's a reg'lar lodger, or so, fer them same coaches. One out an' another come in. This hyer are a rush, don't yer see? an' a mighty healthy one at that. Well, jest make yer-self easy. Dutchy an' me'll fix it up fur yer some way. Git ready fur grub, an' don't yer worry ez long ez yer hez Unkel Bedrock fur yer solid frien'."

Harold stood a listener to this conversation, but without making any motion toward taking a part in it. He was slow to speak at times, and when he could find any one to do his talking for him made no objection.

The little room called the office was barely ten feet square, but it was furnished in one corner with a tin wash-basin and a bucket of water, which rested on a store box, and above them was a small looking glass. Bedrock, as he had called himself, sauntered out with the landlord, leaving the lady to adjust her toilet, and Harold to keep her company.

Mrs. Mowrey was as energetic as she was handsome, and did not waste much time in preparing for supper, even though she guessed her appearance at the table was going to create a sensation. Fortunately, she was dressed for wear, though the materials were of the best quality, and she had a complexion which would wash. In a few minutes she was ready and only waiting for her companion.

"W-w-weally! A remarkable man," he stuttered, as though having finally made up his mind.

"Looks do not go for much with these barbarians, and I suspect he is the man of all others we should have prayed to meet. What we should have done without him I do not know. He is certainly disreputable in appearance, according to Eastern standards, but 'handsome is as handsome does.' He will see that I am provided for in some way, and I will see that you are looked after."

"Thanks, awfully; b-b-but I would wather not have a man shot to pprovide me a woom. They might want to make me sleep with the corpse. He s-s-seemed vevy much in earnest."

"Till he found who it was he would have to go against," laughed the lady. "No doubt Stemwinder Saul has occasion to be thankful for his reputation. Otherwise he might have had what I believe they call a difficulty this evening."

She stopped suddenly in her chatter, and actually almost blushed.

Through the uncurtained door stepped the very gentleman who was the subject of her remarks.

"Pardon me, miss, or madam; but as I

was so fortunate as to overhear the conversation, without any intention on my part, I understand the situation, and, like Captain Scott's coon, will come down without the necessity of any shooting. I will speak to Rahter and have my traps moved out."

"Do not think of it!" eagerly protested Mrs. Mowrey.

"You are only too kind, but I am afraid I have given you a chance for more trouble already than any one could be asked to take for a stranger. Your kind interference in my behalf with the agent at that station where they did not want to bring my trunks is deeply appreciated."

"Let it go at that. I was only sorry I had not followed out my original intention and come down with the coach, instead of on horseback. I might at least have saved your coin. If Primrose is equal to his reputation, together we might have stood them off. It is a wonder the old man didn't try it, anyhow. By the way—it is not likely we will meet again. If I can be of any assistance I should be happy to be called on. In case Bedrock is short, and bankers here decline a loan, mention my name to Rahter. It will be purely a business transaction, you understand, and I mention it so that you will not feel embarrassed. I know you are worth any money you may choose to spend here; but such a fact don't always help in places like Paradise."

He bowed respectfully, and turned to pass out. Marion stopped him.

"One word, sir. You are only too kind; but I ask you whether I ought to accept a favor—for favor it has been—from this man who calls himself Bedrock, or Primrose. In all my life I do not remember having spoken to a more disreputable-looking individual. Yet, what else could I have done?"

"He's a tough-looking old fraud, and that is a fact, and I don't know much about him except by reputation; but, he's a good man to tie to. I only wonder what brought him down here."

The latter part was spoken as if to himself, and with a careless nod the man passed out again, leaving the two to follow at their leisure.

The appearance of the handsome lady and her escort created fully as much excitement as Marion had supposed it would, but every one was respectful; and coarse though the food was to one who had fared as sumptuously as she, it was enjoyed with an appetite born of the long ride.

When supper was over, the two, having no other place to go to, went back to "the office," and, after some dreary conversation, were staring around rather disconsolately, when Rahter came bustlin' in, his fat face full of smiles.

"Dot vos all arranged. Stemwinder Saul says dot he gives oop his room vor so long a dime as vos wanted, undt he pays rent all der same, so he can have it. But dot you can settles vith him or me, shoost as you vants. I dake you dare now; undt dere ish a goot leetle bed for the gentlemen right next door. Oh, ve fix it all oop!"

"Thanks! If you please, I will retire at once. I feel worn out. To-morrow I may have some questions to ask you. Harold, you will come along and see how I am quartered."

Mrs. Mowrey was at last at ease in her mind, and though her room had all the inconveniences of which she could have thought, including a total want of floor, and nothing but a pile of gray blankets on her bunk, she expressed herself as delighted, and gave Harold a cheerful good-night.

The young man was not quite so well contented with the quarters assigned him, but he preferred the seen to the unseen. Even if leaving Marion was to be thought of, he hardly felt like taking his chances at Coaloil Cal's, the only other opposition hotel of any note in the place.

"R-r-reckon you don't close vevy early," he stuttered, as he turned away, after a careless inspection of the four-by-six closet dignified by the name of room.

"I th-th-think I'll go out and view the t-t-town."

Rahter looked him over, and remarked

that the house didn't close at all, but that he had better not come in too carefully if it was at all late or quiet. Gentlemen had a way of shooting right through the walls of their room if they thought there was any one prowling around.

So, came in hand, Harold went out upon the street, and looked around, as though in doubt exactly which way he should go.

The camp was not much to look at by daylight, and now, when the lamps were lighted, the view he had exercised a depressing effect. He would have been delighted to have Stemwinder Saul for a sponsor, and would even have taken up with Uncle Bedrock, had the latter been available.

However, neither of the individuals of whom he naturally thought was at hand, and so, twirling his cane, he strolled down the street for a little, and then came to a sudden halt, as two well-dressed men who were hurrying along halted directly in front of him, one of them holding out his hand, while he cordially spoke:

"Well, of all unexpected things! Ain't your name Mowrey? Glad to see you. My name is Morrison. Met you down in 'Frisco last month."

CHAPTER IV.

AT THE FOUR X BRAND.

Harold Mowrey had certainly been in Frisco at the time indicated, but he did not remember this individual, who he thought must be a sport, and whom he suspected of being something worse. It would have been the part of wisdom to have made some excuse and dropped the gentleman as soon as possible.

But Harold had no money in his pocket, and therefore considered, as he had nothing to lose, it was not necessary to exercise ordinary caution.

He took the offered hand without the least hesitation.

"W-w-weally. Your v-v-voice is familiar, but I bwoke me eyeglasses, and in this deuced light, don'tchaw know, I weally can't fix your face. But I guess it's all wight. Glad to see you."

"Of course it is. But what in the name of wrath are you doing down here? It's a lively sort of place for a tenderfoot to be roaming around alone. Don't you know you ought to have a guardian appointed?"

"R-r-rather late in the day, old man. They've cleaned me out already. Loan me a hundred?—won't you—till I can get some funds to this Gawdforsaken corner of the earth."

"Rather quick work, old fellow, but it ought to cut your eye-teeth, if you are going to have any. If anything happens to me you can send the century to the judge for the benefit of my charming widow. Come along, now, if you want to see Paradise by lamplight. It's a thrifty little burg and no mistake. Better watch what sort of a game you drop into until you get a start. There are some highrollers here you wouldn't think to look at had a shirt to their back; and they'll crowd the limit every time, and raise you a thousand on a pair of sevens."

While the stranger was speaking his wallet came out, and before the astonished Mowrey fairly knew what was happening to him, he felt a few crisp, clean notes in his hand.

"It b-b-beats cock-fighting, don'tcher know?" was his irrelevant question, as he allowed the man to hook an arm within his own and lead him off in the direction of the Four X Brand saloon, the red lights of which were to be seen not far down the straggling street.

"A little early to see the elephant in all his glory," remarked the stranger, by way of conversation.

"Things will be running wide open in an hour or so, but at this time in the evening you will be apt to find it a little tame. I am on my way down to find a man before business begins. By the way, my name is Morrison, if you have forgotten it—first name Jack."

"W-w-weally! Glad to hear it. D—didn't know it from Adam. I never do. Much as I c-c-can afford to wemember my own name."

Morrison laughed genially. Probably he

had no high regard for the mental capacity of the young man, and accepted the statement literally.

"Used to be that way myself when I struck a strange camp. Got over it by the time I had made a few mistakes, and mixed up the wrong names together. Some of these fellows are mighty touchy, you know. Their name is their capital in trade."

"And s-s-such names!"

"Very true; but here we are, and the less said about them the better."

The Four X Brand was already a blaze of light, and the patrons of the establishment had begun to put in an appearance.

"How's your head?" asked Morrison, at the door.

"How much of this benzine can you stand? I want to know so as to keep an eye on you."

"I d-d-don't know that I have a head. G-g-guess I am about with the rest. It c-c-c-can't be worse than absinthe, and I c-c-c-can carry a load of that."

Morrison looked at him a little queerly, but asked no more questions. He led the way to the bar, nodding to three or four men as he came up.

"Join?"

It was a question and a general invitation combined, and no one refused. While the tumblers were being strung out Harold received an introduction to the company, and shook hands in a perfunctory way that was habitual with him when out from under Marlon's supervision.

The night was young, and these were not the kind of men to make remarks, though Harold had worn a plug hat, a b'iled shirt, and drank alone.

"Seen anything of Stemwinder tonight?" asked Morrison, directing the question to the audience at large.

"No; but he's back. I saw him at the Eden this evening. He'll be 'round by and by. You hunting for him, or d'ye only want to see him?"

The question raised a laugh, which broadened as Morrison hastily replied:

"Oh, no. I'm not hunting him at all, and I hope to Heaven he'll never take it into his head to hunt me."

"From which I hope your friend will take due warning. He will understand that though all men are born free out here, they are not all equal, by a blamed sight."

"That was b-b-brought to my attention some time ago," stuttered Harold.

"I s-s-saw him shoot a man to-day."

"Had an object lesson on frontier etiquette, eh? Glad to see it has not been thrown away. I hope it will sink deep."

"It didn't go deep at all. It only c-weased him. But it might have done more just as easy."

Mowrey would have been glad to ask for information in regard to this same Stemwinder Saul, but he had already learned this evening that canvas walls have rather larger ears than any other kind, and judged this was not the place to be inquisitive.

His remarks seemed to head off the conversation in that direction, and a move was made from the bar to a table near by which happened as yet to be unoccupied.

In another minute cards were being dealt, and Harold was embarked on his first game in Paradise, with an actual capital in his pocket of one hundred dollars, which he had just borrowed after such a strange and unexpected fashion.

"You mustn't hit my friend here too hard. He interviewed Captain Hurt this afternoon, and the captain got away with a good share of his available resources," remarked Morrison, as he skinned through his hand.

"Suppose we put a bridle on for this night only, and make up in science what we lose in fun. How will twenty-five suit you all for a limit?"

"As you generally lug off the biggest share of the profits, that's a big piece of self-denial on your part. Twenty-five limit goes, and we don't play straights. If there is any other bit of new-fangled nonsense you want to wring in on us, lay down the law, and we'll try and attend to the profits. I wouldn't wonder if we had caught Jack off color, and he's sharp

enough to know when not to trust to his nerve."

It was a little hard to tell from his tone whether he spoke in earnest or not, but Mowrey was willing to take the hint.

"W-w-wealy, you make me blush. P-p-play the game as she is played at P-p-paradise, and when I've gone b-b-broke I'll go home, and start fresh to-morrow."

No more was said about a limit, and when, in the next hand, he straddled a blind and won a cool hundred on the show down, he was not only fairly equipped for the game, but had made the impression that he might be dangerous in spite of his singular style.

Shortly after the conversation at that table began to be strictly business in its nature, and the cards to slip faster in the deal as the thing grew interesting. Mowrey held nothing great in the way of hands, but his luck was something wonderful. If he had known the cards by name he could not have told better when to draw to a bobtail flush, or when to discard a side ace. He did the latter when he had gone blind a hundred with four tens in his hand, and reaped much spoil. There did not seem any danger of his going broke for some time to come.

So far the game had gone on without a complaint, but when Harold discarded three cards, and then offered to rake down several hundred with four of a kind, there came an explosion as sudden as it was unexpected.

The chief sufferer was fired by a dark suspicion, and that instant Harold found himself looking into the muzzle of a deringer, while a voice which had been full of rollicking good humor now sounded savage and stern.

"Hold on, young man. Don't you move till we count those cards. I'm staking a good bit that we find something crooked on the board."

Mowrey never moved a muscle, but stared the speaker in the face, as he drawled, with his usual stutter:

"B-b-blame you, shoot! It's p-p-part of your trade."

"Oh, come, Addison," hastily interposed Morrison.

"I've got as sharp eyes as any man, and I'm next deepest in the hole. Maybe you mean I'm in it, too."

"C-c-come yourself, my d-d-deah Jack. It's g-g-going to be my funeral. It suits me to a chawm, so d-d-don't interfere, but let the deah boy show his arithmetic. Is there a pweacher in the camp?"

"I'm not saying a word about you, Jack," interposed Addison Lane. "But there seems to be something wrong with the deck, and this young man is taking advantage of it. We want to see what it is. He may be as big a fool as he looks, but that don't seem to keep him from winning a pile of money."

His eye had left Mowrey as he spoke, and rested upon Morrison, and that instant Harold took his opportunity.

With a dart quicker than a panther's spring he caught the outstretched wrist with one hand, while, with the other, he seized the questioner by the throat.

There was a report from the pistol, but the bullet went ripping through the canvas top of the establishment, and then the two men were rolling together on the ground.

"Well, I will be dog-goned," exclaimed Morrison, thrown off his mental poise for the instant, though he turned a second later none too soon.

"Keep back, gentlemen! Keep back, if you please. My friends are just settling a bit of difference of opinion, and will be done in a minute, but they've dumped about a thousand on the floor, and I'll shoot the first outsider who steps near it!"

In either hand he held a pistol, and he was well enough known there for those who had started the rush to understand that he meant every word he said.

CHAPTER V.

THE ROW AT THE BRAND.

"V-v-vewy sorry I had to do it," remarked Harold, calmly, as he rose from the floor.

"I g-g-got a good hold on his thwoat, and he won't w-w-worry about bweath-ing for two or three minutes. What is the etiquette?"

"Hang it all! I don't see how you could have done anything else; but it's provoking," answered Morrison.

"Put your money in your pocket—I guess I have the most of it corralled here under my foot—and we'll retire. If he wants you, let him hunt you up. Maybe by to-morrow he'll see things in a different lamp. I swear, I didn't mean to lead you into such a snap."

"A vewy soft one so far," drawled the young man, as he calmly gathered up his winnings, and some other notes which seemed to belong to him.

"I don't want to tear you away, but I wather think my luck has turned, and it won't hurt hard if I see a chance to jump the game."

"Don't be a fool," whispered his strangely-made friend.

"Addison is one of your deadly soft men, that generally kill when they go on the warpath. How you did it I don't see, for by all rights you ought to be dead now. If you give him half a chance he'll have your scalp yet. And I'm afraid the mob is going to hold you here till he is able to act for himself. I'll stay with you, but don't you forget it, you're in danger."

There was something so serious in the tones of Morrison that even Harold Mowrey could understand the unpleasantness of the situation, though his face gave no token that he appreciated it.

He was a little surprised, however, when he looked over the room, for things had changed considerably since he had entered it.

Evening had shaded into night, and though things at the Four X had not reached the high pressure notch, they were beginning to boom.

The room was full, if not crowded, and the kind of people who were there when the young man entered were no longer to be seen, for they were hidden in the crowd of rough-looking miners, and harder visaged sports who thronged the tables and the bar.

The report of the pistol had turned nearly all faces in that direction, and even Jack Morrison, cool and fearless though he might be, could hardly be expected to keep them much longer at bay, especially when it was generally known who it was that the other two men from the game were raising from the ground.

Morrison looked anxiously in that direction himself.

There were no marks of blood to be seen anywhere, and yet, the limp form had a strangely suspicious appearance. It seemed hardly possible that in such a brief time the young man could have worked such damage without the use of a weapon.

What Jack Morrison feared happened.

Some one raised a cry.

"Man shot! Fifth this week; it's time to stop!"

An answer came from another part of the room:

"Bring out Judge Lynch. He ought ter have been hyer long ago."

"Who's ther stiff?"

"Reckon it war Ad Lane. He war in ther game, an' I don't see him thar now."

"Sail in!"

And with a whoop the rush once more started.

Morrison felt it would be impossible to fight the crowd, and believed it was too late for retreat, yet he was willing to make one effort at least to secure the latter for the young man, who seemed unable or unwilling to act himself.

"Look out for Ad that you don't tramp him!" he hastily shouted, as he pulled Harold back behind the men who were raising the body.

At the same time a knife flashed into his hand, and as he came within reach of the canvas wall he gave a drawing thrust which left a slit four or five feet in length.

"Wetweat? Never!"

Mowrey swung himself away from the

side of his friend, and continued to face the crowd.

The body of the senseless gambler was in the way, and had checked the crowd a trifle, but they were on him now, and half a dozen hands caught at him.

"Up with him!"

"Swing him off!"

"Hyer's yer rope!"

So the cries arose, and though Morrison stayed with his friend, he attempted no resistance, and his voice could not be heard above the turmoil. He was a fearless man, as such things go, but did not know where to begin at, and waited for the mob to quiet down a little before undertaking to reason it into an understanding of the facts of the case.

But the mob did not intend to quiet down. The harder part of the hard element seemed to have got to the front, and it looked as though it might not intend to wait for a rope or a court.

The turmoil grew greater. Two or three revolvers were discharged, while shouts, oaths, and curses rose. Morrison was at his wits' end, when a new factor entered the game.

Through the slit he had made in the canvas a single man bounded into the room, and darted straight at the struggling crowd.

He wasted no time in appeal or threats, but hit out wherever he found a head; and every time he hit, a man went down. Left and right, left and right his fists shot out, until he had cleared a road to the prisoner.

Then, for the first time, his voice was heard.

"Steady, now! If you must hang some one, suppose you hang me. You might just as well, and there will be twice the fun in it."

As everybody was facing the other way, there had been no trouble about getting in his work; but when he tore Mowrey away from the hands which still held him, and flung him behind his back, it was the other way. Two dozen men were facing his way, and it was a question whether or not the shooting was to begin at once. It might have done so had it not been for Morrison, who followed into the push, bringing a bit of news.

"Hold on, you idiots! Here's Lane, on his feet, ready to attend to his own affairs. There's nothing the matter with him up to the present time but a very bad case of big head."

With news like this, and Stemwinder Saul surveying them coldly, his hands well down to where they could drop and draw without an instant's delay, it was not altogether strange there should be a check in the programme, and when Addison Lane came forward, still somewhat limp, but with no permanent damage visible, the question of lynch law was laid on the table.

It seemed likely the settlement of accounts would be with the newcomer, who had made his way so unceremoniously to the heart of the throng.

For that the Stemwinder was ready; and the matter might have been made interesting had it not been for Lane himself, who was recovering his strength with every second.

"Give me a pistol, somebody, and the man that moves a finger in this riot till I get square has to account to me. I'm on my feet again, and running things. He took me foul, but I'll play him again, even or quits."

"You blamed idiot, if you had had sense enough to leave when you had him throttled! I can't leave the Stemwinder now, but if you see the chance, slide out! We'll have all Paradise here in a minute more, and Saul himself can't quiet the racket."

Morrison was certainly looking out for the young man as well as he could, but he understood the contract better than Harold appeared to, and did not like it a bit. His whispered advice was well meant, but not so well received.

"Weally! And wh-wh-what do you think I ought to be doing?"

There was no answer to the question. Business was too near ready to begin.

Some one had handed Ad Lane a six-shooter.

"If you please, one moment, Mr. Lane."

When a man like Stemwinder Saul spoke it was worth while to listen to him. Every one else was quiet to hear him.

"I've hit the wrong man myself, occasionally, shooting in a crowd like this, and the racket that followed pretty well tore up a bigger ranch than the Four X. If this thing is to go any farther it might be as well to arrange things in some sort of shape. I shall be happy to act for the stranger and you can refer me to a friend."

Billy Harris, who claimed to be the proprietor of the Four X, was on hand by this time, and the suggestion struck him more than favorably.

"Couldn't be fairer, Ad, and it will give the boys no end of a chance to see the fun without stopping lead on your account. A regular duel, man. Don't lose your nerve."

"Suits me to a charm," answered Addison Lane, suddenly becoming deadly cool.

"Just so the boys see none of them get away. I'm going to make a clean up before I get through."

A howl of delight arose. There was a tough element in the crowd that would have been willing to take their chances of a stray shot if they could see a meeting between Stemwinder Saul and Addison Lane. They would have been willing to allow Mowrey to vanish.

With this permission it did not take long to arrange the few preliminaries for the slaughter of the stranger.

It was moonlight, and in front of the Four X the road was broad.

One position was as favorable as the other, and the two men were to be placed at thirty paces, to shoot at the word "fire," and after that to advance if they wanted until the last barrel of their sixes was empty.

The first shot might be an uncertain one, for at the distance it seemed like shooting at the shadow of a man; but it looked as though all the chances were in favor of Lane, who was used to that sort of thing.

No one consulted Mowrey in the matter. He stood watching the preparations without much apparent interest, and when Stemwinder Saul placed a hand on his arm to lead him to his position he walked along very much like a man in a dream. The road was lined with spectators, but they kept respectfully away from its center.

"Now, then, you don't want to lose your head," whispered Saul, rapidly.

"In this light and with all that mad on, Ad will never tell us apart till he has taken the shot. When we get there you want to place me, and then slide out for one side. I'll drop him the first shot, for he'll hold his fire a trifle long, and then we'll mix ourselves up again, the crowd will say you're a daisy, and everything will be lovely. See?"

CHAPTER VI.

THE DUEL IN THE DARK.

It was really a pity the look which Harold Mowrey cast upon his friend had to be lost in the dimness of the moonlight.

"Weally! I'm a p-p-pin of a different hair. I d-d-don't know much about shooting, but I generally take my own gruel."

"But this is not your gruel, it's the other fellow's. There's something behind all this that I'd like you to live long enough to find out. If you're tired of living, though—and any man who would come to Paradise Point must be, unless he can't help himself—all right. When Billy gives the word, bang away. You can't do worse than miss him, and it's almost dead sure he won't miss you."

With complete disgust at the way his proposition was received, Saul placed the revolver in the hand of his principal, and then stepped back a trifle. It seemed to him that Mowrey shut both eyes as Billy Harris began to count.

"One, two."

At the word "three" Saul threw himself flat on the ground.

There was an instant of pause before the order came:

"Fire!"

Two pistols cracked so simultaneously they made but one report; and then, just as fast as he could draw hammer back and pull the trigger, Harold sent shot after shot hurtling down the street, though there was no answer from the other end of the line.

"Let up, pard, you got him!"

Saul raised himself carefully and peered at a little huddled mass. No wonder he spoke, for Mowrey was wasting lead at a frightful rate. Not a shot was going within ten feet of it.

Morrison and a couple of others came running up.

"This time he's down for good, and no one can kick about it. Come inside of the Brand and treat the crowd. There'll be no trouble now to see you through. You put up a good, stiff fight, but who would have thought it?"

"Every word true," added Saul, who was now on his feet.

"He put up lots of trouble for other folks, too, and yet, I'm not sure he's as big a fool as he looks. They are carrying Ad over to his shanty, but he don't seem to be done for, more's the pity."

The words seemed cold-blooded and wicked, but Saul was thinking of what might have been saved in the future; it was probably a question of one life, or a half dozen.

Things went on about as Morrison had suggested.

Half the camp was there, and everybody who was not a particular friend of the wounded man was inclined to make a hero of Mowrey, but no one knew better than Morrison and Saul on what slippery ground the temporary chief was standing. They allowed him to make a hole in his winnings at the bar, but they got him away before he had time to tramp on any toes, or tempt fate farther.

The natural move would have been for the hotel, but Morrison suggested they stop at his "office," and there was no objection to the proposition.

The "office" turned out to be quite a different building from any Harold had yet inspected.

It was built of logs brought from the neighboring canyon, and roofed over with rough puncheons covered with sods. On a pinch it might have done for a fort, and as the light flared up it could be seen there were loopholes in each of the four walls, as though it might have been planned for some such purpose.

The furniture was rough and scanty. Harold, with a gesture of weariness, threw himself down on a bench, while Morrison and Saul drew up seats to the table.

"My man's not here yet, and I begin to think he's not coming," was the way Morrison opened the conversation.

Saul gave a low "hump!" which might mean almost anything, but covertly he turned the point of his thumb toward the recumbent figure. He seemed uncertain whether it was advisable to talk business before the stranger.

"Oh, he's all right. And, by the way, what's the matter with taking him in on the ground floor, if we think we can make room? With such amazing luck as he had to-night, he's better than capital and brains."

"Yes, but luck is a blamed sight harder to manage than either of the others. And I suspect he's not a free moral agent. Still, if you say so, Barkis is willin'."

"If you fellows are t-t-talking about me you can just m-m-make up your minds I'll not go into anything worth less than half a million. It w-w-would take all of that to keep me here a month."

"Don't know but what you are right. I wouldn't either. About how much capital would you expect to put in with a chance for a profit like that?"

"Not a blamed cent."

"Short and sweet."

"If I c-c-couldn't, how c-c-could I?"

"I've got more b'wains than money, and you fellows say I haven't much of them."

"Humph!"

"I say, though, if it was a real good thing, Marion might put in something, if you need coin. She has dead loads of it."

Morrison considered a little.

"Guess we won't mix a woman up in the matter. We have one in it now, and two of that kind don't always go well together. But you're mighty cool about it."

"Always c-c-cool about everything. What's the use to sp-p-plutter?" F-f-fall on my feet every time."

"I believe you, my boy—and I've known you about two hours."

"Weally. Thought you s-s-said you m-m-met me down in 'Frisco?"

"So I did—in Judge Ames' office. That was introduction enough for Paradise, even if we didn't speak. Don't take much to make an old friend here."

"Demmit, I wemember you at last; and here I've been taking you for a c-c-confidence man all evening. Weally!"

The two listeners burst into a laugh, all the more hearty from the ludicrous way in which Mowrey straightened himself up into a sitting posture and stared at Morrison.

"P-p-perhaps you're one of Judge Ames' friends, too?" he added, turning to Saul.

"Oh, no. I'm just an ordinary, everyday, all around, bad man of the mining camp. Ames is a touch above me, but I'm equal to the average. I guess you don't want to mix in what Jack and I want to talk about, but we can trust you just the same."

"Hush!" interposed Morrison.

"I hear a step outside, and I wouldn't wonder if he was coming now."

A gentle knock dropped upon the door, and Jack shouted:

"Come in!"

The newcomer proved not to be exactly a stranger to Mowrey, though he slouched in with a more exaggerated air of disrespectability than he had yet shown.

"Long-looked-fur kim at last," he remarked, as he closed the door behind him.

"Very neat job you fellers sot up onto Ad Lane, but Stemwinder war slow a trifle about gittin' to ther front, an' didn't git in his work any too good. Ad hez b'in able ter swear quite vigorous, an' by termorrer 'll be 'round ag'in, lookin' fur blood. Ef he don't git it it'll be a wonder, ez he'll hev' three chances ter one."

Then, for the first time, he saw Harold; and did not appear to be at all taken back. He grinned and nodded, but turned his attention again without delay to Morrison.

"Makes ther old man feel good ter git inter ther swim ag'in. B'in a month sense he seen a show fur rale, right-down fun, an' when Stemwinder drapped his first man ter-day I felt ez though I war a gittin' home."

His dialect was more pronounced than ever, and yet there was something about the man which denoted strength and shrewdness. Morrison seemed to be glad to see him; and Stemwinder Saul to be not at all offended at his words.

"Haven't a doubt of it, Primrose; and the only thing which surprised me was that you didn't have a front seat on the band wagon this evening. You must have been accumulating modesty at a fearful rate during the last month."

"You'd a b'in glad ter hev' seen me thar', I ain't a doubt; but Bedrock, fur wunst, war layin' low. It was your circus; though, in course, ef it begun ter look too desp'rit, I'd 'a' chipped. What's ther good word?"

"Everything running right, and the gang will start in the morning. We are looking to you to lead the outfit, while Saul does the bossing. I shall go along as a high private in the rear rank. Have been trying to recruit our friend, here, but he seems chronically tired, and prefers to stay behind in Paradise and trust to the tender mercies of Ad Lane. By the way, what will become of him

when we leave? Ad swings a healthy gang behind him, and luck itself can't fight a town."

"And a town like this," added Saul.

"Three thousand men got together in a week, and die dog or eat the hatchet with the most of them. Perhaps he thinks it was a rocky road to travel to-night. What would it have been if he bucked the crowd alone? One-half the toughs at the Brand would have cut his throat for a quarter; and if looks went for anything Lane would have given twice that sum to see the job good and done. Say, youngster, what has he got laid up against you?"

"C-c-can't pwove it by me. M-m-maybe Marion would know."

"What has he got against the lady, then? Wouldn't wonder if that was more to the point."

"Ask me s-s-something easy."

"We'll all give it up, then, and turn to business. That is, if there is anything farther to talk over. To me it looks as though everything was ready, and that tomorrow we would be on the way to help poor Brander."

"S-s-say, you fellows want to jabber secrets, and I'm in the way. Dwive on with your cattle show. I'll go back to the Dutchman's and bunk in."

"Wait a bit, and I'll go along," suggested Morrison, who had his bed there.

"No, thanks; I'm not at all afraid."

Without hesitation the young man, after nodding good-night to all, swung out of the door, and made his way toward the hotel. He knew he might be recognized by any one who had seen him at the Four X, but that did not seem to have any terrors for him, whatever his late friends might think of the contingency.

Striding along and whistling softly an air that might be popular in 'Frisco, but which had not reached Paradise as yet, he was hardly prepared for the adventure which was to come.

With a sudden dart a woman sprang to his side from out of the darkness.

CHAPTER VII.

HARMONY HALL TAKES FIRE.

"Oh, sir, will you, can you, protect me?"

The exclamation and the appearance of the woman came together, and Harold had no time to be surprised by the one when he heard the other.

He turned lazily.

"Weally, aw, it's a contract to pwoteet myself. I'll have to consider. W-w-what is the matter?"

Before there was opportunity to reply there was the sound of heavy, running feet rapidly approaching the spot.

The woman—and by this time Harold had discovered that she was little more than a girl—had seemed exhausted, and almost ready to drop at the feet of the young man.

Hearing the footsteps, she straightened herself, as though about to dart away.

"One m-m-minute. You had better stay here. You c-c-can't go far, and I'll do the best I can, but it's likely to be a beastly mess. Who are they?"

He jerked his head toward the shadows he saw over his shoulder, and then seemed to pay no farther attention to them.

"I'm afraid my uncle is one of them, and I fear him worst of all. Here, keep this for me until I can send for it. They will stop to threaten me and you can make your escape. Hasten! Off with you!"

"Wather late in the day. They are here now! And, besides, it's too awful exciting to run away. You know how it is y-v-yourself."

Scarcely noticing what he did, Harold thrust the envelope into his pocket, and, with a smooth side step, a great deal more rapid than it looked, placed himself between the girl and the coming men.

"Down you go, purty," said the foremost of the three, who were by this time close at hand.

As he spoke he slung out his fist with a wickedness that meant a broken jaw if it got home.

The light was very indistinct to trust to, but Harold could do no better. By instinct guessing where the blow was in-

tended to fall, he shifted a trifle to the left, throwing up his right arm as a guard, sending a return booming in that landed with none the less force because it was delivered with the left hand.

The fellow went rolling away directly under the feet of his advancing friends, and close in his wake came Mowrey, hitting out left and right with a vigor that would have done Stemwinder Saul good to see.

Two men went staggering back, and upon one of them Harold sprang with the vicious earnestness of a mad cat. His fists beat a tattoo for a little, temporarily blinding the man, and then, when the third assailant, recovering himself, advanced to take a hand in, Mowrey turned to him, letting go his right with all his weight behind it.

"Now, little one, it's time to get out of the evening air. Step lightly for the nearest thing that looks like shelter."

He caught the young woman by the hand, and together they ran along the street. While none of the three were actually knocked out, they had all been handled after such an unexpected fashion there was little danger of their taking up the trail immediately.

"This way! this way!" exclaimed the girl, before they had gone two hundred yards. She turned sharply at the corner of a long, low "building," from which issued the sound of music and a babel of voices. Men were standing in front of it, and some of them, at least, were watching their approach.

"Harmony Hall," whispered she.

"Here I will be safe for a little, while I can think. Do not believe evil of me, and accept my thanks a thousand times over for the courage which stood by a stranger. But, for your own sake, get away at once. Keep on around the hall, and do not let anything stop you until you get under cover—if possible, without being followed."

"I think I w-w-will. This camp is bewildering. T-t-take your letter, if you p-p-please."

He held out the envelope she had placed in his hands.

The girl waved it away.

"I had forgotten already. One more favor, if you dare grant it. Keep the paper until I send for it. Linda Lyle is my name, and when you hear that you have warrant to deliver it. Go!"

She waited for no remonstrance or objection, but, turning from him entered the hall by a canvas door, leaving the young man to stare after her in some perplexity.

"What next?" he thought.

"She walked in as though she belonged there, and I suppose she does. It must be some sort of a show place, with her for one of the actors. For a town no older than Paradise I must say they go the entire figure, and can put up as much amusement as any I have heard of. I'll have to see what the place is like or I'd be dying with curiosity before morning."

One would have thought Mowrey had seen enough for one night, but it did not seem so to him. He strolled slowly around the institution, and approached it from the front.

In an Eastern city he would never have thought of entering through such a crowd, and would not have been far wrong in believing that to do so would be at the danger of his life.

Here it seemed to be rather the natural thing, and he went along without hesitation, though there was one thing which was either an encouragement or a warning as he chose to take it.

He distinctly heard, in a low tone:

"It's ther galoot as downed Ad Lane."

"Blast him! He kin afford ter sling style. But yer wouldn't think it ter look at him."

The music which had temporarily ceased inside struck up again, and paying the dollar demanded of him, he made his way into the hall.

As he suspected, it was a combination of concert saloon, drinking and gambling establishment, and dance-house, though at present the audience was taking in the dubious entertainment which they had liberally paid for.

The place had a frame of rough posts and poles, with, for the most part, canvas sides, and as tables and chairs had been piled away in one corner, the spectators were expected to stand, though a good many of them in the front row were squatted on the ground.

At one end there was a raised stage, on which the performance was given, and the curtain was just going up again as Harold entered.

A little rough scenery was disclosed, and a chair in the middle of the stage. By the time he had made out that much the performer next in order came gliding forward, and Mowrey had no difficulty in deciding that she was Linda Lyle. She carried a banjo under her arm, and after a bow to the audience, seated herself in the chair, executed a "roll," and then glided off into "Home, Sweet Home," as an instrumental solo.

Harold had heard it played more than once, for few banjoists have failed to have it in their repertoire, but it seemed to him that never had he heard it so artistically rendered.

The audience were evidently of his own way of thinking, for they listened in breathless silence to the close, while here and there was an eye which glistened with something like a tear. When the last notes died away there was a clapping of hands and a wild chorus of shouts, which told how well the familiar strains had pleased them.

A turn or two of the pegs, a touching of a couple of chords, and the player began to rattle off a jig which seemed trying to put quicksilver into every heel. One rough-looking fellow began to pat, while half a dozen spread their elbows to make room, and capered in fair time. A little more, and the dancing mania would have spread through the whole crowd.

Even listless Harold Mowrey began to feel something of the fever, though he was hardly likely to show any of the symptoms. He was trying to coolly read the face of the girl, though the music was greatly interfering with the self-imposed task.

One thing was certain. She was undeniably handsome.

Beautiful might, perhaps, be a better word. He had already heard her voice and had certain ideas of its owner, so that prejudice did not blind his eyes when she came on the stage. There was nothing bold, and yet there was no timidity about her manner. He rather suspected she was a lady with a history.

And yet, when she had finished her first solo, he had only murmured:

"Weally."

There was no longer the silence in the tent which had greeted that first effort to its close. The sounds of patting hands, shuffling feet, and jocular remarks filled the room, though clearly and distinctly above them rose the musical tum-tum of the wonderfully clear-toned instrument.

In the midst of it all there was a sudden cry, and then came a confusion that almost instantly ripened into a panic. A cry of "Fire!" arose, and at the same time a wave of flame shot up with a great roar, and Mowrey, cool now as ever, could distinctly distinguish the odor of burning gasoline.

"W—w—what are they shouting about?" he stuttered to his neighbor.

"If the b—b—blame thing don't explode there's no danger. It'll be rough on Harmony Hall, though."

"S'posin' she do explode, though?" shouted the man addressed, recovering his powers of locomotion, but by no means his courage, for he joined in the rush to the door, just as the sharp rattle of firearms began.

That last meant something else, and having rapidly learned wisdom since entering Paradise, Mowrey turned his attention toward the stage.

Linda Lyle had never missed a note, though she was nearing the close of her act as the alarm was raised.

She finished to the last bar, and then coolly withdrew by the route she had come. Like Harold, she was inclined to think, with such opportunity for egress there could be no great harm done to the

audience, and it was not her place to look after the building.

The pistol-shots caused her to quicken her steps somewhat, for she fancied there might be some desperate work on hand, in which she certainly had better not be mixed.

There were half a dozen steps by which the descent was made from the stage to the dressing-room—green-room here was hardly the word—and down these she was running lightly, when she tripped over some obstacle and pitched forward, right into the arms of a man who appeared to be waiting to receive her.

"Quick, matey, I've got her," growled a harsh voice.

"Help me kerry her to ther hosses. Ef ary cuss stops ther road, use yer knife. We cain't lose her now."

CHAPTER VIII.

A PRIVATE CONVERSATION.

As Harold Mowrey closed the door behind him a smile lit up the face of Morrison.

"I'm afraid the young chap will be worse mixed than ever if he tries to piece together the bits of information he may think he has picked up from our conversation. The question is, whether we might not just as well have talked straight goods and run the chances. He is a square fellow, and can be trusted, unless I am away off."

"Square enough, in one way, but I'm mighty much puzzled myself to know whether he is as big a fool as he looks, or as sharp a man as he acts. One way or another he does beat the deck. How did you come to wring in with him?"

Saul's question was carelessly met, though one might have believed it was asked in no good humor.

"Oh, it was the merest luck. I recognized his face, and spoke without thinking. Then I knew, as a greenhorn, he hadn't ought to be wandering around Paradise alone after sundown, and I took him in tow. The nerve he showed in striking me for a loan endeared him to my heart, and after that I just had to stay with him."

"He's a fraud, all the same?"

"Not a bit of it. He stutters and he drawls, and looks about half awake, just because it's the 'natur' av the b'aste," but the man who is cracking jokes with Judge Ames, behind his desk, is not apt to be much of a fraud, and the chances are he won't pan out much of a fool."

"What is he here for? What is the lady who is under his charge doing in Paradise, if they are that sort of people?"

"About that lady. Tell me something more. I heard him mention the name of Marion, but I did not think of her as being on the ground. Is she really and truly a—lady?"

"From the ground up, if I am any judge of such matters. And that makes me more suspicious of this young man. She has a mission here of some kind, and he has been picked out as the right sort of a man to take care of her."

"He don't seem much afflicted over the task, and would as soon as not die and leave her alone in this town of wickedness and woe. Wonder if he is as much alone as he seems. Say! You're not a side pard of his yourself, are you?"

Saul turned sharply on Bedrock and gave him a keen look.

"Skassly. An' it 'pears ez ef I might be askin' ov ther same 'thout ary reason fur you ter git yer brissles up. You b'in a chippin' several times, regardless, but I jest reckon in ther nat'ral goodness ov yer heart you got mixed up with 'em, an' we'll be seeln' more er less ov 'em all along tell ther bank closes an' somebody goes broke."

"Let her break," said Saul, carelessly.

"We've thrown in so much time over this nonsense it's no use to try to buzz about anything else, I suppose; but if you'll take my advice you'll go slow till you find what this pair is after. They may be going to run slap into us, and then again, they might be a help when we're least looking for it."

"I reckon yer a little wild, an' yit, I dunno. I war' a watchin' him when you

let that name drap, an' I couldn't see a sign ov a quiver; but it jest don't seem ez though sech folks could 'a' come down hyer fur ary such thing. S'pose I draw ther female out, an' see what she's got ter say. It's her game, in course, an' she'd be ther most likely ter chatter ov ther two."

"Try it on, if you like. It seems to be a sure thing that the man is a stranger to both you and Saul, and Ames might have been giving counsel on 'most any subject in the world. Of course, what I said about moving in the morning was only a flam and we'll go when we get ready."

"Cert. An' ef they should be frien's ov poor Brander thar'll be time ernuf ter draw 'em inter ther ring. But whar' does Ad an' his gang come in at, ef they be?"

"Perhaps that is just the point we want to find out to explain a mystery. Lane may have been in the game for all we know."

The council of war was not proceeding very satisfactorily. The late arrivals made a riddle which was not easy to solve, and after all, speculation on the subject could not produce any definite knowledge. The three talked it over, but it was to compare possibilities more than anything else. Bedrock grew weary.

"All good enough ter consider, but et ain't helpin' Brander wuth a cent, er puttin' money in our pockets. I'm ready ter move when yer calls on me, but I'll sail down town an' see how ther balls are a rollin', an' you kin kill ther rest ov ther night ef yer wants to. So long."

Bedrock slouched out, leaving the two to carry on the conversation, which they did in a much more lively style than might have been expected.

"It's pretty sure, I think, that they have no connection, though it did look a trifle mysterious."

Saul considered a moment before he answered. When he spoke it was after a positive fashion.

"If they did have, I don't see how it would make any difference, provided our man was on the square."

"Supposing he is not? Suppose his object is to lead us off on some wild-goose chase?"

"All the better."

"How can you make that out?"

"Give us one end of the rope. We wouldn't follow very far before we found out the game; and then we would have a chance to find out who was at the other end of that same string."

"Something in that, for a fact."

"A heap. If they happen to be on our side there'll be a chance to develop it, and they may have brought out a heap already. What's the matter with Ad Lane having had a big hand in the whole scheme? He may know a heap more than we do about the ins and outs of it."

"If he does it's a pretty fair show that Brander isn't dead. If he was, the gang would let all creation root around. They couldn't find out more than has been told already. We are on the trail, sure; and I am satisfied to trust Primrose as far as we can see him. We had better lose no time, but get down to business."

"There's two sides to it. Every hour we waste makes it that much worse for Brander, if he is in the land of the living, as we have some reason to think he is. And yet, there is a chance that if Lane is mixed up with the affair, and these two are looking for information on the subject, something worth knowing might be developed if we watched them. And it don't seem to be the square thing to go away and leave a party who may be Brander's friends to the tender mercy of that gang. This stuttering dude may be a very good man in his way, but he would have more than his share if he had to hold up their end against such a crowd as trains behind Ad."

"Then why not come squarely out and ask the young lady what her game is and uncover our hand? If she is on another trail altogether she will have to take her chances. If on the same with us, we can take them in on our level. If they are on the other side we can be no worse off. They will know our position, anyhow."

"All right. That's what Bedrock proposes. It's too late to attend to it to-night, but we'll try it first thing in the morning—provided he don't get in his work."

"And, since Primrose is here, everything is ready to move the minute we get the word."

"Yes. Could pull out to-night, if need be."

"All right, then. I've given up my room to the lady in question, and, if you don't object, I'll bunk in here."

"Not a bit of it. There's a couple of blankets there that will make you half-way comfortable, and I'd stay myself if I wasn't afraid it might make some one think there was a scheme afloat to bankrupt the town. I wouldn't wonder if some of the shadowers had kept an eye on us as it is, wondering what sort of a plot we were hatching up."

"Just so they don't drop on to the real truth, and follow us on the march. Might complicate matters, for the coyotes would hang along just out of range, and give the office to every soul for a score of miles in every direction."

"All right, if they want to try it on. We'll give them something to think of. It's too early to bunk in, and nothing particular to do here. Guess we may as well take a little swing around town and see what's going on. If Mowrey hasn't got in yet, we'll have to hunt him up."

The two went out together, and strolled slowly down the street in the direction followed by Mowrey some half an hour before.

As they moved along, chatting carelessly, they heard a rattle of hoofs, and three or four mounted men went by.

Saul touched the arm of his companion.

"Odd sort of a gang, that. Looks as though there might be mischief afoot. Did you see they had a led horse?"

"Didn't notice it. But what if they had?"

"Means something, and we'd better hurry up to the head of the procession, if we don't want to miss the fun."

As if in answer to the suggestion, there was a great flare of light, as the flame shot up the sides of Harmony Hall, and they heard the roar that followed. Without hesitation they hurried for the spot.

CHAPTER IX.

AD LANE STOCKS THE CARDS.

Addison Lane was a little weak and a good deal hurt as to his pride; but he was in no particular danger from the wound he had received in the duel which he had forced on the young stranger.

No one was more surprised than himself at the result of the affair, and yet, he was inclined to believe it had been simply a run of bad luck with him from start to finish, and another chance would end in an entirely different way.

Steve Worley, one of his friends, came in from the Four X Brand about the time he was plastered up for the night, and brought the intelligence that the young man, after lingering around the saloon for a little, had gone off in company with Morrison and Stemwinder Saul, and that they were engaged in conversation at the office of the former.

There was some guesswork about this, but the announcement was near enough to the truth, though the conclusions drawn from it were wide of the mark.

Steve gave the keynote to the popular idea.

"You drawed ther badger a leetle soon fur them ez counted on bettin' good gold on him. 'Thar' ain't many boyees in ther camp ez won't 'a' dropped to ther sort of a hairpin he is, an' they'll give him a chance ter swing ez wide ez he chooses tell he rips up again' a regular chief. He ain't no flat, an' don't yer furgit it, ef I kin jedge."

"A flat—with Stemwinder Saul and Jack Morrison backing him! I should smile. And as for chiefs—he's tried me. It will take a gang to down him, a regular gang; and they'll have to more than half try. I'd give a hundred if I was out and around to lead them. Maybe you'd like the job at twice the money?"

"Honest Injun?"

"It's blamed likely I'd be lying here to make fun, and me with a ball of his in my carcass?"

"Tho't mebbe you war' wantin' ter save him up fur yer own perivate pickin'. Ef that war' meant fur pure biz, count me in."

Steve was no stranger to the wounded gambler, and the latter knew he was ready for any job with coin in it, and with no scruples as to how he executed it.

In public they simply spoke as they passed by; but in private they had an understanding, and Lane was not afraid to trust him as far as money would buy him.

"There's no infernal nonsense of that kind about me. I want him out of the road, and the sooner the better. If it can be done to-night, all right; the money waits. Just so he's done up for good."

"Git ther coryner ter take his measure, an' order a wooden overcoat. We'll hev' ther corpus riddy. Ef not ter-night, ter-morrow night. He may hev' gone ter roost afore we kin git on his trail ag'in. Half in advance?"

"Half goes; but you take all the risks."

"Risk, blazes! In a rush like this! Nine ter one some un' 'd drop him fur a quarter, an' blow on hisself ef he got a dollar. With a blamed fresh like him all yer got ter do are ter keep out ov ther way ov ther Stemwinder's fists an' shooters. Ther town don't count."

"All right. Any way, any way, so that the thing won't be plastered on me. I have enough of my own to carry."

"But say, boss, thar's some reason fur wantin' him outer ther way besides ther frolic up at ther Brand. Ef I knowed what it war' I'd be sure how to act. It's kinder jumpin' in ther dark not ter know his best hold."

"Never mind that. Imagine him the best kind of an all around man, and go for him accordingly. No more to-night. I'm about played."

It did seem that Lane had overtaken himself, for his voice had become husky and his face whiter.

Yet, he managed, every movement of his hand made with care to avoid exertion, to extract several bills from a roll under his pillow, and place them in the hand of his willing tool.

Then he closed his eyes, as if he desired to finish the interview; and Steve stole away.

The town was at its liveliest then, though the larger part of its population was indoors.

Some few were asleep, but the saloons held the greater part of the balance. The Brand was overflowing; and the tough concern of Bob Bingley, though nothing like so extensive, held almost as many patrons.

They were crowded in front of the bar, scattered around the tables, and waiting their chances in the back part of the establishment.

Here, the honest-looking miner was scarce; and from the fact that nearly every man who went in there was ready to risk his life for a dime, it was, as a general thing, until too much liquor got on board, one of the quietest places in town.

Nevertheless, an honest man had no business in there unless he had a record which would hold Bob Bingley's thugs in awe.

He would be apt to go down very quietly, and then be handed out of the back door, stripped and insensible. In the morning a funeral would be in order.

Several such cases had occurred; but though the rest of the camp had its suspicions, nothing could be known.

It was to this place that Steve turned his steps after leaving the bedside of Addison Lane.

He was very much at home there, for really half the men were as bad as himself, and some of the rest were.

He slipped in, mingled carelessly with the crowd, stood for a moment at the bar, and then, winking lightly at two men, more hand-dog-looking than himself, gradually made his way out again.

He lingered for a trifle in front of the place and then strolled slowly away, until he was joined by his two selected partners.

"What's ther job, Steve?" asked one of them.

"A slug apiece, an' ten more fur me ef ther work goes right."

"We're in it, ov course. Who's ther bloke?"

"Tain't w'uth while ter name ther game tell yer see et flushed. Then make yer teeth meet fur good an' all."

"Say, you think he kerries too many guns fur us, an' we'd be afeared ter tackle him ef we knowed what we war' ter go ag'in? Mebbe yes, an' mebbe no; but ef that's yer game we want ter see ther color ov ther coin afore we reesk our pereshus necks."

The second rough chipped in:

"Billy ain't fur off. Half down. When we git through thar' may not be so many ter devide."

"Half down goes; but ef yer such blamed fools ez ter git wiped out in ther clean up I wouldn't 'a' picked yer out, with all that gang layin' 'round, waitin' fur a snap."

"Ter tip ther bloke frum behind, an' say nothin', eh? All right. We're thar'. P'int him out."

"Reckon it must be Stemwinder hisself."

"Not so fur wrong, ez he's trainin' with that crowd; but it ain't him prezactly. It's ther dood cuss ez raised ther riot with Ad Lane."

Billy gave a low whistle, while his pard muttered:

"Might 'a' knowed it."

"No hurry, yer knows. Ter-night, ef it kin be; but ter-morrer night, ef it ain't sooner. We're on ther way ter look fur him now."

"Ad can't be behind this, fur he's dead."

"Never you mind. Thar's good money behind it, ez sez he must go up ther flume. Hello!"

The racket at Harmony Hall had begun, and without delay they ran toward the place, for the moment forgetful of the red work they were pledged to do.

CHAPTER X.

THE BATTLE AT THE BLAZE.

The place of amusement known as Harmony Hall stood by itself, and there was little danger of the neighboring buildings taking fire, yet a conflagration of any kind in such a camp raises excitement, and the cry of fire is always enough to fill the streets.

Paradise poured out to the scene, and there were enough noise and confusion to cloak almost any scheme. The ruffian who had seized Linda Lyle appeared to think so, for though he spoke of haste he made it slowly.

He halted to get a better grip with one hand and arm, while he secured his other hand across her mouth. It was not likely that so long as there was no one in sight her screams could attract more attention than those of others who had been rendered wild by the fire, but the danger was avoided as far as possible.

It was a momentary delay, but it brought help on the ground which was not looked for.

From under the stage dashed Harold Mowrey, as silent and as savage as a panther.

Yet, the moment he saw what was going on, he crouched and waited. A battle in there was not the best thing in the world. The flames were already coming, and man or woman who went down and was left behind would be apt to die.

And he knew there was a chance something might happen to himself.

Perhaps something of the kind occurred to Linda, for she ceased struggling, and suffered herself to be half-carried, half-led, from the spot.

Mowrey followed stealthily and silently.

He was not observed by the men, or if he was, no thought was given to the possibility of his making an attack.

"Cl'ar ther track!" shouted the leader, as with Linda in his arms he burst into the open air.

There were but few persons at the point of exit.

Those who had come out from the dressing room had not finished their flight, while the audience were passing, or trying to pass, out at the front. There, too, those who had already been attracted by the alarm had gathered.

The way seemed open; and at a little distance in the rear of the building was a knot of horses, their bridles held by a single mounted man.

Toward them the men who had seized Linda were hastening when Harold Mowrey judged it was time to act.

The first intimation he gave of his presence was a straightforward blow, which caught the chief of the abductors a little low down on the back of the neck.

Lucky for the man it fell where it did. A little higher up and he would never have risen again. As it was, he lay quivering, while Linda, released from his arms, sprang lightly away, and dodging a hand hastily thrust out to detain her, ran swiftly toward the crowd in front of the concern.

Harold was uncertain whether or not this was the same party which once before had attacked the young woman. He rather believed it was, and as she had seemed to believe the Hall was a place of refuge, he reasoned that perhaps there would be safety for her in the crowd. He did not call to her or follow her, but with half a dozen bounds placed himself so as to intercept pursuit.

"If you p-p-please!" he exclaimed, holding out his arms in what was certainly not an aggressive way.

"D-d-drop that. The young l-l-lady is under my chawge."

The men were strangers to the camp.

At least they had not yet heard of Harold Mowrey, and the sight of a young man, dressed a long way nearer to fashion than they were accustomed to, and addressing them with about as much stutter as drawl, had no particular terrors.

At the same time he stood in the way; and they were men who seldom cared to waste time in going around. They never hesitated, but dashed right at him, one of them swinging a knife.

It was a weapon he knew how to use, and he thrust as he came with a most vicious good-will. He was never more surprised in his life than when the blade failed to go home.

Instead, it gritted along the barrel of a revolver with which Harold made the parry, and an instant later he thrust out his foot as the man would have dashed on.

Down he went, and then Mowrey turned to the third man, but his hand flew up as he saw that same maneuver being executed on the other side.

There were two reports; but two bullets went whistling harmlessly upward. Mowrey fell from a blow from behind, while a hat, slung by a coming man, who was still a dozen yards away, caught the other on the face and caused the wildness of the shot.

The coming man was Stemwinder Saul, and he was around none too soon.

Mowrey had been putting up a very comfortable fight with three men, but the new factor in the game was likely to prove too much for him.

It was Steve Worley who struck the blow which felled him, and along with him were the two pards who had been chosen for mischief.

He was springing forward with an eye to finishing his work when the man knocked down in the first place gathered his senses somewhat together and fired from a crouching position full into his face.

Some attention had already been attracted that way, and the report of the pistol brought the crowd, or at least a good portion of it, sweeping around to see what was going on.

The result was a mixed affair, which was a bigger excitement than the burning of the Hall. The crowd was ripe for anything, and as there was no chance to save the building, which by this time was thoroughly in flames, and as there was little plunder to be accumulated, the fight was the first thing of importance.

Without knowing what it was about, every one seemed willing to take a hand, and as the three men who started it made their escape in the one direction, while Saul and Morrison retired quietly when they saw Harold Mowrey crawling away in the other, the list of the killed and wounded has nothing to do with the course of this story. Steve Worley came out of it with no greater harm than a bullet through his cheek, while his two pards were unhurt altogether, but sadly disappointed.

Without noticing that his two friends were near, Mowrey looked about him in search of the young musician. So far he knew little about her, and twenty-four hours before he would have laughed at the idea of having even a passing interest in a woman who was performing in a saloon in a place like Paradise Flat.

He did not admit to himself that he had more than a passing interest in her, if even that much, but he said that having gone this far in what he could not help but own was considerable of an adventure, it was his duty to see it through, for that time, at least.

If Linda could be believed, the persons who were in pursuit had some sort of a claim upon her, though he could not tell whether it was a legal one or not.

Had any one told him the story his sympathies would have been apt to be on the other side. He would have thought an uncle who was pursuing a handsome young woman, who was making a living at the doubtful profession she evidently followed, was probably trying to save her from herself, and he would have dismissed the whole thing with the thought, "Good luck go with him."

Fortunately, or unfortunately, he fancied he had caught a glimpse of that uncle, and had he analyzed his thoughts he would have found a lurking suspicion that it was the other way, and that it was more than likely Linda Lyle despised the business, and hated whoever drove her to it as deeply as by rights she ought to.

At any rate, there was no knowing what effect the conflagration might have on the young woman, and Harold was inclined to offer his services if she could be found. He had rescued her; but she might still be in deep need of a refuge.

He went through the crowd in what no doubt, seemed to it a leisurely way, but which, for him, was a case of rapid movement, and he glided around so quietly that the two men who were watching for him quite lost sight of him, and before they gave over the search he was out of reach, anyhow. He had come upon the young lady quite unexpectedly, and right at the proper time, though it was by chance.

He heard a voice which was reasonably familiar, and looking in that direction, saw Primrose.

It seemed to be his turn to be playing the part of rescuer now.

He was holding the drop on two rough-looking men, men who were actually more disreputable in appearance than himself.

"Don't keer a cuss," he was saying.

"I ain't jest ez han'sum' ez a chromo, but I'm dubbel distilled honey 'longside sich sardines ez you be, an' ef yer tries ter bother angeliferous missy. I'm a stoppin' ov it ef I hev' ter lift ther hull tops off'n yer cabezas. You hear me warble?"

For a wonder, too, the crowd was with Bedrock; and half a dozen men, rough, rude, but in earnest, were flanking the two men whom Primrose was holding at bay.

"But I tell you the girl is as mad as a March hare. I am here with the authority of the law, and have papers from her guardian."

One of the men, in spite of his garb,

spoke in language that might have been convincing with some other person than Bedrock.

"Law don't go in Parydise," retorted Bedrock.

"We're all blamed heathen hyer, an' we on'y b'lieve in givin' ev'ryboddy a good, squar' show. Ef thar's a woman 'sulted, er a boss stole, we jest 'p'int some man ter climb a tree, an' see thet it's did. Then, ther world moves on. Ef it war'n't so fur ter ther next cottonwood we'd take yer thar' now."

Bedrock leisurely put up his pistols and surveyed the two with indignation in his eyes. Had he chosen to follow the matter up, it is possible he might have got them as far as the cottonwood after all, but he did not care to proceed to extremity, since the young lady who had been the cause of the dispute had slipped out of sight; and Harold Mowrey was the only person who seemed to see which way she went.

He followed quickly, and overtook her before she had gone many yards.

"W-w-weally. If you always make things so lively it's no w-w-wonder the town likes you. C-c-can I aid you any way?"

Linda turned sharply at the first sound of his voice, but recognized it an instant later.

"Thanks. You appear to be always on hand. Twice you have come off safely. Better beware that the third time I do not bring you bad luck. I am safe now. At the Eden no one will dare molest me."

"I am g-g-going there myself," was his short answer, and the two walked on silently after that. It was not far to the hotel, and they reached it without interruption.

CHAPTER XI.

A STRANGE MEETING.

"In the name of all the saints, what have you been doing?"

Mindful of the caution given him by Rahter, Harold had not attempted to make his way to the cuddy-hole called his room with any particular effort at silence.

It is true, his footfalls made but little sound as they fell upon the bare ground, and unless he yelled to give notice of his approach, the average sleeper would not have been disturbed by his advent, but in some sympathetic way his coming was made known.

Holding a lighted lamp above her head, Marion came out into the narrow passage, and faced her brother with a look of wonder on her face.

The question was not a singular one under the circumstances.

According to the accounts he had tripped lightly along through the devious ways of Paradise, holding his own under every and any circumstances, but it must not be supposed he could go through it all without a little scorching.

Indeed, a person who only had a casual glance at him as he climbed out of the stage on his arrival would never have known him now.

His hat was battered down closely on his head, his face was smutched with blood, his clothing was torn and dirty, and in one hand, though unconscious of the fact, he carried a revolver.

He winked and blinked at the light which Marion suddenly thrust in his face, and gave a smile which did not altogether lose its quizzical expression under the semi-mask of blood and grime which marred its effect.

"D-d-don't ask me; ask the neighbors. I sh-sh-should judge I had been having some f-f-fun with the boys."

"I declare. It looks as though the fun had all been for the other side."

"Weally, no. You ought to see t-t-them!"

"If they look any worse than you do, Heaven help them!" exclaimed Mrs. Mowrey.

"Weally, I hope so. W-w-one or two of them are pwobably corpses."

Harold was a trifle indignant at the reception, though he might have expected little else. He was unprepared for what followed. The little cry which Marion

gave was not exactly of disgust or sympathy. As his eyes sought hers he saw she was staring straight over his shoulder, and, with a quick wheel, he faced the other way, the hammer of his revolver rising as he turned.

There was no cause for alarm. The light now behind him revealed Linda Lyle as she glided down the passage.

"You will pardon him," she was saying.

"Had it not been for his bravery and skill I do not know what would have become of me. In your presence I can thank him as I would hardly have dared to do before."

"Weally. It was n—n—nothing."

For the sake of Marion's silence, Harold spoke. He was uncertain what sort of reception his sister would give this young lady, and he hardly knew what were his own wishes in the matter.

For himself, such acquaintance was all very well; how far he should be her sponsor to the feminine world at large was a different matter. He was hardly prepared for the words with which Mrs. Mowrey broke her silence:

"Linda Lyle! Can it possibly be you?"

There was wonder, horror, even terror in the tones, and Mowrey was so thoroughly astonished at the appearance of the musician of Harmony Hall having such an effect upon Marion that he shrank back, as if to allow the one to pass to the other.

"What is there strange in it that we should meet again?" was the cool retort.

"The time and place are a little singular, and the means of our introduction more so; but outside of that—fate will be served."

"But—but, I heard you were dead."

"So reported, was it? Sorry for the disappointment of the world at large, but you can see with your own eyes that I am very much alive. Whether it is a disappointment to you, as well as to some others, I am not prepared to say, but I suspect it is."

"Disappointment! You are mad! Give me credit for keeping my senses under the shock of meeting a ghost. Of all things in this world, nothing could have pleased me better."

The passage was not long, and with three or four strides Marion was at her side.

The lamp was something of a nuisance, but Marion managed to hold it safely in one hand, while her other arm clasped around the waist of the girl from the concert hall. To Harold it was a remarkable situation. Here was his sister actually kissing this young stranger, and he had not an idea in the world what it was all about.

"Come to my room at once. Now that I have found you I shall never let you go. It is worth all the trouble and danger of this journey here."

Mr. Mowrey concluded he might as well silently retire. The opening to his bunk was close at hand, and as no one seemed inclined to notice him, he rolled through it and into bed without offering to say good-night.

He had not known he was so tired. With all he might have thought of—enough, surely, to keep an ordinary man awake the rest of the night—he simply closed his eyes. After that he knew nothing more of what was and had been going on. He fell asleep before he could turn over.

From her actions it would have been hard to say whether Linda was glad or otherwise. She followed Marion, but said not a word, and once within the room sank silently into a seat.

"From what you and Harold have said I understand you have just had a shock, or an escape, or something of that kind. And then, my dawning on you so unexpectedly! I don't wonder you are struck dumb. Lie down on the bed and rest yourself a moment; or, are you too much used-up to talk to-night? If you are, go to sleep like a good girl, and we'll talk in the morning. But, out of my sight you don't go till I know all about you, and how, if you need me, I can be of service to you."

Marion was over her surprise now, and could talk from the heart. If words went

for anything, and manner, she was showing all the delight possible at meeting with a former friend.

"As well here as elsewhere," responded Linda, wearily, and she threw herself upon the bed.

"I board here myself, but my room is hardly as safe a spot as this, and just now it begins to look as though my life might be hanging by a hair. Beware that you don't bring yourself into the same danger."

"I can believe you, my dear. But what has brought you here?"

"I might ask the same question, and I suspect we would agree in our answers. Of course, there was a man in the case. There always is."

At this reversal of the old proverb Marion smiled in spite of herself. The two were recovering their nerves, which had gone abroad at the unexpected meeting.

A moment later the smile changed into an anxious look. It was certain neither had come to Paradise for a frolic.

"Yes, dear, there is, but not in the sense you think. I am looking for him solely for his benefit, and not at all for my own pleasure."

"I might say the same, though it would not be altogether the truth, for, though I would never have ventured here for my own pleasure, yet I confess to being somewhat selfish about it all, nevertheless. It is duty, Marion; but I suspect the pleasure of doing it counts for as much as the duty itself. I am trying to save a life."

"And I am trying to save a man's honor."

"And both of us are more like to destroy ourselves than to succeed. I came near to the verge to-night. Had it not been for that young man—your brother, was it?—I shudder to think of what might have happened."

"My brother, yes. Poor fellow. He is not of the brightest, but somehow he manages now and then to be of some use in the world. There is one thing certain. He has nothing of what we weaker vessels call nerves. If there was an earthquake, and the ground yawned in front of him, he would simply smile, and say 'Weally.'"

"And be none the less a hero for all that. He is a young paladin, if we have such things in these latter days. Twice he came to my rescue to-night. Had he been anything but the man he was it would have gone ill with both of us."

"It seems ridiculous, but of course it must be so. It was fortunate I brought him along. I assure you, he did not care to come save on my account, and I think he would have been glad enough to have turned the duty over to some one else."

"It was well that it was not done. But why beat about the bush? You are dying to know how I come to be here; and probably I have as much curiosity. I did not believe a soul living would have recognized me, and if I had been on my guard I doubt if you would have done it. If you were not on the ground, I assure you, you never should have known. As it is, you can have some sympathy, and understand there are facts in the case which ought to assure my pardon, even though the world at large would never grant it."

"We were friends long ago, and it is not likely I would doubt you now. If you are willing we will confide in each other. If you think it best I will ask nothing. Have it your own way. There are few to whom I would care to talk confidentially. Perhaps, with you, there are none at all."

"Do not think it. My secrets are not mine alone. But even if they belong to another, I am not afraid to trust you with them. I am here hunting for one Hugh Brander."

The other uttered a little cry of surprise. "And so am I."

Then they drew themselves up a little stiffly, and stared at each other with swiftly-born suspicion.

CHAPTER XII.

CONFIDENCES.

For a moment it looked as though the two were about to change base entirely. From friends they might have become something

more than strangers had they not taken time to think before they spoke.

"I might have known it."

Linda was the first to break the silence.

"Great minds are said to run in the same channels, and there is nothing wonderful that ours should be bent on the same thing. The question is, whether we can work together, or if we are to be generous foes. I think I can trust you to the very limit."

"Spoken like my old friend. Forgive me if I was startled. I had not thought of our having, by any possibility, an interest in the same person. Shall we show our hands? After that, you know, we can forget, if it must be so."

"To be sure. The question is, what is Brander to us?"

"For my part, I do not know. He may find in me a real friend. Again, I may be destined to be his sternest enemy. Who knows?"

"Nothing more than one of those two?"

"Nothing."

"And I can say the same. After that, neither of us can doubt the other. Shall I tell my story first?"

"As you choose."

The momentary distrust was gone. The two were the old friends again. They drew near, and their voices, which had been incautiously loud, sank once more into whispers.

"In the first place, Hugh Brander is nothing to me. I have never spoken to him. I could almost say I had never seen him, since the one view I had of him was in the twilight, and lasted for but a moment. I heard his voice, though, and I never could forget that. I would recognize it wherever I might hear it."

"When was that?"

"I was living with my uncle then, who was—and for that matter is—my guardian. I am afraid I have not been a very dutiful ward, though he has been very good to me in times past. I knew little of his friends, who seldom, if ever, came to his residence, and I had never even heard of Hugh Brander before that evening."

"This was after I lost sight of you?"

"Yes. We were living very comfortably, and I understood that uncle was a stockbroker, or something of the kind."

"One evening I was alone in the little parlor fronting on the street, when I heard Uncle John come in. He swung the front door shut behind him, but the lock did not catch, though I think he let himself in with a night key."

"I saw a man hurrying along on the sidewalk, who ran up the steps and tried the door. As it yielded to his touch, he entered without knock or ring."

"I was surprised, and half turned to speak to uncle, who had already partially opened the door leading from the hall. I do not think he suspected my presence there, and fortunately, or unfortunately, I did not speak."

"He seemed to hear the opening and closing of the front door, and turned toward it."

"There was a light burning in the hall, and he must have seen the intruder, for he spoke in what I thought then was a somewhat cautious tone."

"Is that you, Brander?"

"Yes. Hush, for Heaven's sake! Speak lower."

"You should not have come here, but for this time I guess no harm is done. What's up?"

"I'm off. I can't face it. You know how things are, and to-morrow it will all come out. I want a thousand, or as much of it as you can give me, and I want to know if you are willing to stand by me if I write you some time in the future?"

"A thousand? You must think I am a walking depository. I might rake up a hundred or so, but it's too late now to make a raise. I tell you, though, if you are not a fool, you will stay here and let them crack their whips."

"I can't. You know why."

"Perhaps you are right. But I'd like to go over the matter with you. We might find a way out."

"No. It cannot be done. There is no

other way out. I must bolt. I cannot waste a moment of time, even with you."

"There was little more said, for the man seemed in urgent haste. I know my uncle gave him money, what he had in his pocket-book, and then the stranger went away. Uncle followed him to the door, while I took the opportunity to slip away to my room. I did not want it known that I had overheard."

"The next day I read it in the papers that Brander was a defaulter to the tune of many thousands, and that he had utterly vanished. I asked no questions, and thought no more of it for a long time. I did not particularly blame my uncle for helping him off. If I had heard nothing more about Jack and his methods, it would never have struck me that possibly the young man might have been more victim than embezzler."

"What did you hear?"

Marion had followed the story closely, and showed a deep interest.

"I found out that the stockbroking business was all a sham, that Jack had all along been a beast of prey. I found that he knew where Brander went to, and that he had an interest of fifty thousand dollars in the death of the man whom he had helped away. More than that. I found that he was to die soon, and that he was going to die so that it could all be told, and proved, and Uncle Jack was going to be all the richer for it. Terrible story, is it not?"

"Terrible, indeed. And you are here to prevent it."

"Yes. I knew where he had been, and I thought I would find traces of him there. Money was none too plenty with me, and under the circumstances I could not trust it to another. Besides, I wanted to get out of Jack's reach. So I came West."

"But this place could not have been thought of when you started to hunt for him?"

"No; but when I found no traces of him where I had expected to, I felt sure he must have led the rush. I only came a day or so too late to be with the first of it myself. Then, I came down here as one of the leading stars of Harmony Hall, and have been keeping my eyes open, but have found no trace of him here, either. Uncle Jack has found me, though; and I expect it will be war to the knife between us."

"And Harold? How does he come into the story? Surely, you never met him before?"

"No. He is only an incident. I had the satisfaction of seeing him knock Uncle Jack down, and after a little he came once more to my rescue, though who it was from I have no idea in the world. Those are the outlines. We can fill in the rest at our leisure. Now, then. What is Hugh Brander to you?"

"At present, nothing at all. He was—my husband."

It was said quietly, but Linda Lyle, listening, knew that in the few words she heard a whole story.

"And you are looking for him to tell him there may have been a mistake?"

"Partly. And if there was no mistake, to see if he cannot have another chance to begin life over. We were poor in those days, but it is different now, and if twenty-five thousand can set him on his feet again, he shall have another chance. It will be a bagatelle to me, and I owe him that much. I know he did not take the money, but he may have to pay it back just the same. I can't, and perhaps I daren't, prove who did."

"And so you are trying quietly to find him, too? If Uncle Jack gets at him first there will not be much chance for either of us. We will be too late. And as yet I have found out—nothing."

"And you are doing all this for a stranger?"

"It's six of one and half a dozen of the other. I suspect Jack would like to kill me, too. I know too much. Do you think he knows anything about you?"

"Scarcely, as yet. But if he keeps his eyes open he will not be in ignorance long. And yet, who knows? And, for the matter

of that, who cares? Life is not so very well worth the living that one should moan over it if it stops a little short of three score and ten."

"My dear, you talk as though you had lived about two score and ten of those years since we last met. That wouldn't leave so many months to your credit, unless you are counting on four score in your case. Suppose we go to sleep now, and finish it up in the morning. We have a common interest, and perhaps by that time we will be ready to lay our plans together."

It was time, for both of them had been severely tried that day, and they needed rest and recuperation for the work still before them.

CHAPTER XIII.

PRIMROSE GETS POINTERS.

Had they known the facts as they appeared on the surface, the men of the rush camp of Paradise Point might have thought it strange the young woman of wealth who arrived on the stage should share her couch so willingly with the girl who was a star of the first magnitude at Harmony Hall.

It is true the hall had been open but a week, yet in that time it had as firmly established itself as if it had always been. It was as important a place as an academy of music in a metropolis, and Linda Lyle was a Patti on a small scale.

The community at large was inclined to believe the conflagration which had wiped out the popular place of amusement had been the result of an accident, and the fight which followed was such an ordinary affair, with so little gore, that it was hardly thought of by the time the flames had ceased to flare, and the first opera house of Paradise Point had been numbered with the things which were.

Of course there were a few who had suspicions, and another few who had certainties, but they kept their thoughts to themselves. As for the proprietor, he had managed to save some of his belongings, and was not altogether bankrupt. He was ready to pick flint and try it again, though that was going to take time.

The two young women slept late the next morning, and came out to the breakfast table when most of the patrons of the Eden had already finished and gone.

It was Sunday morning, and being a recognized day of rest, everybody thought it his duty to get a move on. There were washing and baking to be done by the more pious ones, while the great mass had to begin early to get in a full day of rest and recreation.

Of course, the real amusements of the day would not begin at such an early hour, but a large share of the population were wise through experience, and attended to the laying in of supplies, and necessary repairs of clothing, before starting in to paint the town with the crimson of a Sabbath afternoon.

After witnessing their meeting the night before, Harold Mowrey was not astonished at seeing the two ladies enter together the dining room, where he had just taken his seat.

He had never hitherto heard Marion mention Linda Lyle, but he understood they had been friends in the past, and intended to continue the relationship for the present.

That suited him very well. Harold was not in the habit of exhibiting much interest in members of the opposite sex, but he had an idea that this young lady would prove "chummy," and altogether out of the line of ladies he had hitherto met. As Marion treated her as a friend he felt that she had the right to the same treatment from himself.

All three looked improved from their night's rest. The ladies were fresh and smiling, while Harold had repaired damages, and might have just stepped out of a band-box.

There was one thing he noticed with a mental grin.

Marion, unconsciously perhaps, was treating him with a certain amount of respect that was certainly a new thing for her.

As a brother, and as a propriety escort she had shown him a certain amount of regard, and perhaps of affection, but he had known that her respect for his individual capacity had been by no means great. He guessed that Linda had been telling facts from current history which had opened her eyes.

There was some little conversation while the meal was going on, and when it drew to a close, Marion remarked in a low tone:

"Linda and I have some things to talk with you about. I did not suppose you could help me except by your presence, but she has made me think almost differently."

"Weally. I c-c-can twy."

His drawl was almost enough to make Marion doubt, but Linda Lyle had seen what went with it, and gave a little glance of encouragement. Then they went out together, and in default of a better place adjourned to Marion's room.

"There need be no mystery about it," Marion began.

"If you can keep it to yourself you may even help us. We are engaged in a silent search for Hugh Brander, the man who was once my husband."

"Weally. S-s-so are s-s-some more."

"You have heard of it, then?"

"S-s-so reported."

"It is life or death, whether we find him first or not."

"For B-b-brander or the other f-f-fellow?"

"For Brander. It is his life which seems to be at stake."

"Bwander can t-t-take care of himself," said Harold, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"The l-l-last time we talked of him you weren't caring if he c-c-couldn't."

"Forget all that. We want to find him now and warn him—and something more. Perhaps he may even be able to go back again to the world in which he belongs. We can do little ourselves without putting some one else on the track, but we must find some one who can search for us. Perhaps Mr. Rahter could help us. And we must see about having money sent to us at once. It was lucky, perhaps, that we did not bring a better supply."

"There's no r-r-rush about coin. My p-p-pocket's pretty well filled, and I think I have the man in view you are wanting right now. He is not m-m-much to look at, but he is a good one to stay."

"What! Brander?"

"N-n-no! The man to f-f-find him."

"Then let us confer with him at once, though I would like to be sure he would not betray us."

"What is there to b-b-betray? He'll either look for him, or he w-w-won't. If I was after a man I'd send a f-f-fellow through the camp with a bell. The more looking for him, the less chance f-f-for the other fellow to get in his work."

"A good deal there is in that last," said Linda, reflectively.

"We can do no harm by employing the man, whoever he may be, and we can keep on looking ourselves. We won't fold our hands, I guess. I don't know but what it would be wise to shout it from the housetop that there is a scheme to murder him for money, and offer a reward to the first one who tells him."

"That might do, were it not for one thing. It is not certain that the officers of the law are looking for him now, but too much publicity might set them on his track. I am more inclined to the first idea. Let Harold go out and bring in his man. We will see what he looks like and then decide."

Harold might have said something as to what the man he had in view looked like, but he refrained. He had been putting several things together, and had formed a theory of his own.

"Next time she won't put off telling me what's in the wind till the last minute," he said, with a shrug of the shoulders.

Then he went out in search of the agent he had in view.

When he came back he had in tow the rough-and-ready looking individual who

had befriended them on their first approach to the Eden Hotel.

He came without the least hesitation, and though he was as tough-looking in his apparel as ever, and his face had a beard which was stubbier by another day's growth, he did not appear at all abashed in the presence of the ladies.

He swung off his battered old hat with a lordly air, and it was not at all certain his bow was not meant to be condescending.

"Mornin', leddys. Hope I see yer all well. Anythin' Unkel Bedrock kin do fur you'll be did free, gratis, 'cordin' ter contract. Don't waste no time foolin' 'round ther edges, but chip right in ther hull limit. You've struck a man w'ot you kin tie to."

"Probably—provided he is not already tied to some one else. That last is what we are anxious to know. Are you open to an engagement?"

Marion was not altogether shocked at the agent Harold had selected. He had already made her his debtor, and she was satisfied that if he was truly loyal she could not find a better helper in the work in which she expected to be engaged.

"Hit ther nail on ther head ther fust clatter," was his hearty answer.

"Primrose, ther puffeck, never throwed off on a woman yit w'ot war trustin' ov him with his cornsent, an' et ain't likely he'll begin now. An' yit, I'll admit thet I hev' a sorter other begagement, an' et mought be I couldn't run 'em tergether. If I can't I'll let yer know; but I never seen yit ther two things, er ther duzzen fur that matter, ez I couldn't put on ther same string."

"Tell him what you want," said Linda, impulsively. "Let him know what is wanted of him, and, yes or no, let us get rid of him. I feel it in my bones that if we have time to let him do his talking he'll own the whole outfit before we get done with it."

"Sense, that, by ther bushel. I jeneral-ly does that same thing, fur a fact. I ain't much ter look at, but when I git on ther war-path, great Caesar! but I'm a good 'un ter go."

"In few words, then: I want to find a man who, in the East, passed by the name of Hugh Brander. Can you help me?"

"In the West, at one time, he was known as Smith, but that is not much to go by," added Linda.

"There were several John Smiths in San Francisco, where he made his first halt, and two or three at Walnut Bar, where he was last heard of. From there he was supposed to have come to Paradise, and we must get on his trail without the unnecessary delay of a moment."

"Kin go out and chuck a rock an' hit a Jack Smith what come from Bunco in ther fust gang I lay eyes on. But et ain't so sure et'd be ther right one. Et's not half ez easy ez it looks, an' me a stranger. But I'm willin' ter make a try, an' ef I miss ther use, as ther long tails say, et sha'n't cost yer a cent."

"And if you hit it—how then?"

"'Cordin' ter what yer thinks et's w'uth. A hundred er a thousand, er figgers along thar', an' up'ards. I'm willin' ter 'sorb 'most any 'mount. An' when I find him what are I ter tell him?"

"That Marion must see him at once, on a matter of life or death. Then, bring him to me, or me to him. I will attend to the rest."

"Call et a go; but I'd like 'most mighty well ter ring in my pard onto this game. Jess ez you say, though."

Harold shot a quick glance at Primrose, but said nothing. He had an idea who the pard might be, but he waited for Marion to decide.

"If you can vouch for him, why not? Two men can make a better hunt than one. But my dealings will be with you. Begin without delay."

"All right. An' afore we part you might be givin' me a few p'inters on his style an' sich. Et makes ther needle easier ter find ef yer know its size."

There was truth in that, yet the description which Marion gave might have fitted a hundred or more men in Paradise, and none of them be the right man. Yet Bed-

rock smiled, and nodded, and as he went out chuckled:

"With that fur a starter I got him sure ef he's lyer."

CHAPTER XIV.

A WOMAN OF THE WEST.

The report which Steve Worley had to make was not what Addison Lane had hoped to hear, but it was somewhat soothing to his pride.

Whoever this man might be who was so ready with cards, pistols and fists, he was certainly a holy terror, and Worley seemed inclined to think he was even more.

Though Steve had not been able to learn the exact facts in the case, he knew that Mowrey had been engaged in some sort of a desperate conflict before he and his pards came on the carpet, and had apparently come off first best. By dint of questioning he had located the stranger sport of the singular style at the Eden Hotel, and had learned also that he had escorted the sweet singer of Harmony Hall thither.

"An' that same are ther biggest thing of all. Jest in town, an' not half-dressed up, but ther fust night he holds over Ad Lane with cards and sixes, bez Steinwinder Saul fur a pard, an' makes a mash on ther high-toned gal at ther Harmony. If his luck holds out, what'll he be doin' next?"

That was about the way he thought it, though he did not use exactly those words to the wounded gambler. Ad Lane was quick to draw, and his finger was still strong enough to press a trigger.

But he gave a fair history of his unsuccessful campaign, with some conclusions he had drawn from what he had seen; and much as he toned the latter down, they seemed to be too strong meat to suit his listener.

"I'll be out myself to-morrow, and as good as ever before the end of the week. If you can't turn the trick, it's just that much coin left in my pocket, and I'll show you how it ought to be done. Curse him! I can wait! But if you're not afraid to have him see you, keep an eye on him, and let me know what he does."

"Afraid, nothin'. Reckon I kin pick my flint an' try it ag'in. But I know jest what I'm a handlin' now, an' you bet I'll handle it keeful. How about ther petty-coats? Any orders 'bout them?"

"Never mind them. I'll attend to that part myself. What you want to be trying is to get a bead on the infernal dude, and then let go. Hustle out and attend to your work. I'm not paying to have you sit here all day."

As there were some formal words of profanity connected with the remarks which are hardly suitable for promiscuous publicity, Steve judged his patron was in earnest and left without demur.

Lane was not anxious to be alone, but he was irritated by the presence of the rough, and it was a relief to see him go. The doctor had made his morning call, breakfast had long before been sent in from the Eden, and Lane settled himself to try and get a nap, as the best way to pass the time.

He succeeded better than he had hoped for, and it was a surprise when he was suddenly awakened out of a sound sleep by an unexpected and not altogether welcome guest.

A light hand touching him on the shoulder dispelled his slumber, and he started and made a quick dart for his pistol even before his eyes were fairly unclosed.

"Steady, Ad, my boy. You want to go a little slow till you understand just what sort of game you are going to have a shy at. You don't really mean you would try on that kind of thing with me?"

The sound of the voice did not altogether reassure the gambler, and he looked doubtfully at the speaker. Perhaps the sudden awakening had bewildered him.

"Oh, come, now," continued the intruder.

"You must know I'm taking no chanees, even with you. Listen, and then say you don't think I have you lined."

The speaker had one hand in the skirt pocket of his coat, and from that region

came a slight sound, which Ad Lane knew well enough was caused by forcing back the hammer of a pistol. His brow cleared away as if by magic.

"Drop it. I'm all right now," said Lane, holding out the hand which had just made the motion toward his pillow.

"It's not generally angels who keep watch over my slumbers, and when I wake up with a start I want to be ready for the worst. But what infernal folly drove you into Paradise this time in the day?"

"What infernal folly put you on the broad of your back, just when I wanted you most?" retorted the other, ignoring the hand which was partially extended.

"You are in nice condition to work, aren't you?"

"Nice enough under the circumstances. If somebody drops to you—as they surely will—it may be all the better for yours truly. They'll hardly hang a man who seems to have one foot in the grave already. But otherwise they would string us both up, sure as fate."

"Don't be alarmed about my being recognized. My own mother wouldn't know me if she met me now, under this disguise."

"Rats! Any one who has half an ear for music could recognize that voice of yours as far as he could hear it; and I tell you, one can hear an awful long ways when he didn't ought to."

"You think?"

The change was wonderful. For an instant Lane thought there was another person in the room. The feminine voice had disappeared, and the illusion was now complete. The visitor seemed nothing more than a good-looking young fellow of medium size, with long, well kept hair, dark mustache, and piercing black eyes.

Yet, from the first, Ad Lane had known his visitor was a woman.

"Charley Travers, at your service. Charley, the Kid from Boston. Handsome Charley, if you choose. Desperado, card-sharp, bad young man, sport at large; any character you choose to make him, and the blacker you paint him the closer you'll hit the mark. I've come down to Paradise to look after my fences and have a little fun."

"You'll have a great deal of fun if they once suspect," growled Lane, fixing his eyes on the handsome face.

"In the name of all that is wonderful, why couldn't you attend to your fences and your gates along the trail, and leave me to take care of the gates of Paradise?"

"Well, the fact is, I sent some of my men in last night to attend to a little private business for me, and they made such an everlasting bungle of it that I wanted to find out the reason why. I wasn't certain whether I ought to pay them double for doing so well under the circumstances or string them up for a set of cowards. Queer, too. They used to be counted good men when they went on the warpath."

"Ten to one they ran against the flying dude. That's what ails me."

"I suspect they did, and like as not I'll have to take the same trip. What I want to know is, why you let yourself get into such a tangle?"

"Only one reason for it, and you ought to suspect that. He is part of the gang. The woman is here, and he came with her. I thought I saw a chance to take him out of the way, and slipped up on it. I knew he must be a good man to have the task of steering her through a rush like this; but he was better even than I thought. And he is in with Steinwinder Saul, Jack Morrison, and that crowd. They mean business."

"And they'll get it, chuck up. The woman has had time to think, and has changed her mind. I wouldn't wonder if they were hunting for each other, and I'll have them both in the corral before the week is out. And these outsiders may as well go along with them. When they get done hunting for Brander they are as like as not to begin to hunt for me."

"They are after him, and that's a fact. If they all pulled together they could scoop the country. But, some pull one way and some another, and blessed if I

wouldn't like to know what they are all after."

"Who cares? I am after revenge, and I don't mind if you know it. And behind that there is a little pile of money out of which I can pay expenses. Where will I be apt to meet this 'Flying Dude'?"

"Just wherever you don't want to see him. That seems to be his style every time. And the Stenwinder will be along a little later."

"Humph! Get away from the one, and the other is bound to win. And, of course, there has nothing definite been heard of Brander?"

"Nothing; except that he came with the rush. If he was here he must have gone on or gone back. I haven't been able to strike any traces of him since the first days of the camp."

"If he has gone on it must have been to prospect in the desert."

"Looks like it."

"And that's a mighty good place to die in. Get the clew, and I'll follow him till doomsday, but I find him. This dude, and the woman he is caring for, must be looked after. They may be the key to the whole situation. I'll see them myself. By the way, you have got onto the man Lyle?"

"Sure. It took work, but I can put my finger on him between hops. He's as lively as a flea. When he gets a steady move on it will be time enough for us to get up and travel."

"If I only knew what he knows, and the hand he means to play. I meant to get it out of the girl; but if I didn't think I would need him, perhaps, later on, I'd take him out to the castle and burn the truth out of him. I may have to do it yet. I'll have you point him out when we get time. So long."

The disguised woman, who professed to be Charley Travers, the kid from Boston, stepped lightly from the cabin, leaving Addison Lane to certain unpleasant reflections as to what might happen to him if his own little schemes were unfolded to Travers, or, on the other hand, if the true character of his late visitor was unmasked.

"The plot thickens," thought the woman, as she strode away.

"Half a dozen men, women and children all on the trail of one poor, trembling fugitive. This Morrison, I take it, represents the law, and Stenwinder Saul the dashing, smashing deputy marshal he has engaged to steer him through the rush camp."

"Jack Lyle is the thug, who sees fifty thousand for himself in the death of the man he one time made believe was his friend. That is to be murder in the garb of accident. I wouldn't wonder if Morrison was to be brought in at the tail end to witness the results and give testimony to the same."

"Then comes the woman who was his wife, with her agents. Perhaps she has found out a mistake or two that happened long ago. If she finds him, what matter? It would be a little extra bliss to break up such a reunited family."

"And then, here is Charley Travers on the trail. He means revenge, pure and simple. And I'm wagering my head for a football that he gets there in the climax. If he does, there will be just a little something sweet for the rest to mourn over. It's a pleasant bit of diversion from the stern demands of business, but I wish it was over."

So the disguised woman thought as she journeyed along the short distance which lay between Ad Lane's cabin and the Eden Hotel.

CHAPTER XV.

"MR. TRAVERS" SHOWS HIS STYLE.

Rahter had the remnants of an old account book to do duty for a register, and in this the latest arrival scrawled his name in black, big letters, and a flourish that went all around and then through it.

"Charley Travers, Boston," was the way it read; but the writer had by no means the appearance of a tenderfoot, and the chances were he had left the city of beans in early childhood.

Well though he was dressed, he had the appearance of a mining sport all over, and

there was a little ridge in the back of his coat collar which seemed to indicate he carried a knife there, Southern fashion. In addition—or, rather, in chief—there was a belt around his waist which supported a pair of revolvers, and in the bosom of his neat flannel shirt there sparkled a diamond pin of large size and first water.

He came into the dining room with his black eyes darting this way and that, and finally falling upon the face of Marion, who, with Linda, and her brother, had just taken seats at a little table provided for them by Rahter.

Had it rested with Linda, the little party would have taken dinner in Marion's room, but the latter preferred otherwise. It was a chance to see some of the men of Paradise, and, better still, to hear their gossip.

No such name as Hugh Brander appeared in the list of the boarders at the hotel, but that went for nothing, and it was possible the man for whom she was searching might suddenly appear at her elbow. There was the other chance that she might hear something of him.

Something about Travers made her inspect him narrowly.

He did not resemble Brander in any respect, but he had an attraction for her all the same, though she managed to disguise the fact reasonably well. When she met his eyes staring straight into her own she gave no evidence of interest or confusion, but coolly swept her own over the natty figure, and smiled a trifle as she noted the array of weapons.

He, in turn, gave a slight, involuntary bow, and faced toward the long table at which he was expected to find a place.

He was right at the corner of the table, and at the end of the bench. He had marked the spot when he entered, and was just taking his seat there, when, with a swiftness sometimes displayed by large men at a time when least expected, a great, hulking, broad-shouldered fellow, in a red shirt, corduroy pants and heavy boots, slid noiselessly down in front of him.

"Age afore beauty, kid," chuckled the man.

"Right now are a good time ter be holdin' it, fer ther second table at ther Eden are—"

He cut short his remarks, and the smile died out of his face.

With a motion so swift that it could hardly have been seen, Travers swung out from his belt a revolver, the hammer of which went back, and the muzzle bored against his spine.

"Hands up, you!" ground out the stranger.

"Quick, or you'll never die of old age!"

There was no mistaking the savage earnestness in the order. It meant that the least hesitation would bring the shot as threatened, and there was no getting away from it. The hands flew up as if drawn by a spring.

"Correct. Now, rise up, William Reilly, and march. You'll take your place at that same second table, or go without dinner."

The fellow had a revolver at his waist, and looked as though, under favorable circumstances, he would be willing to shoot, but he did not linger.

"Sorry I hurt yer feelin's, boss, an' I reckon I won't give no 'cash'un fur yer ter hurt mine. I'm up an' a goin'."

With his hands still held above his head he swaggered out, amidst a perfect silence on the part of the spectators. It had its amusing side, but as it might be uncertain to the minds of the two as to which one the laugh was at, no one let go the control of his risibles. Travers slipped easily into the seat vacated, and, laying his revolver by the side of his plate, leisurely began his dinner.

Either by choice or chance the seat was so situated that it commanded a view of the door, and the corner behind was tolerably safe from attack, as it was backed by the kitchen. After a momentary hush, in which there was a trace of anxiety in the faces of those between Travers and the door, it seemed tolerably certain the

episode was finished for the present, and the business of the table went on in earnest.

Marion and her friends thought all the information they would obtain at that table would hardly amount to much. There was a silence which showed everybody was thinking a great deal, and no one cared to express his thoughts. With remarkable unanimity the decision had been reached that the stranger was a really bad man, and that in default of any profit to be made by it, it would be as well to suspend remarks till he was out of hearing.

There was still a hush in the dining-room when Harold led away his little flock; and hardly had they started for the door when Travers rose also, and made his way out, passing them in the hall.

He was carelessly picking his teeth as he stepped out of the door, and for once seemed to be taken off his guard, for right in front of him rose up the huge form of the fellow who had tried to rob him of his seat.

"Hain's up yerself, dog-gun ye!" he shouted, flourishing a huge, twelve-inch knife.

"Twixt you an' me everythin' seems ter go, an' I reckon I hev' yer foul. You can't be too keerful when yer tries ter ruffle 'round Game Bill, ther clipper frum Sandusky. He's a wheeler, but he allers kims ag'in."

Travers went on picking his teeth daintily, allowing his glance to stray upward until it rested on the florid countenance of the man from Sandusky.

No shade of anxiety disturbed his own serenity, and one could almost have sworn he did not hear the address, or else did not understand it.

At any rate, Game Bill thought he would try it again.

"Lass time ov askin'. Elervate ther digertals er travel up ther flume. Et's me that's a sayin' ov it."

The fellow made a mistake somewhere, for he allowed it to be seen that it was a triumph over the man who had brought him to book a short time before, rather than gore, that he was thirsting for. And to gain it, he was willing to wait a little, in the hope of having all the more fun when it did come.

The worst of it was, he had backing now, and they were men of his own class, who were not recognized cut-throats, and yet could be as brutal as the worst on occasion.

"Thet's ther way ter talk it," shouted one of his pards.

"Ruffle up yer hackles an' go fur him, Bill. Ther blamed galoot'll think he owns ther hull camp next. Better fix him ter plant ef he won't hear reason."

Without any thought of what was coming, Harold had kept on when Marion and her friend had turned aside, and stood a trifle in the rear of the disguised sport, who, for present purposes, is being called Travers.

He had no desire to take part in the affair, and might have turned back had it not been for the side address, which seemed to show the stranger was not likely to get fair play. That settled it with him. He remained to see the rest of it.

"Fix him? In course I will!" shouted back Game Bill.

"Twouldn't do ter start a riot in thar', an' bust Dutchy all up ef thar' was a ounce ov fun about et, ter say nothin' ov ther chance of a stray shot strikin' a lovely weeman. But out hyer! Waugh—h—h! Et's knuckle er keel; an' ther chaine ter choose won't be open much longer. Count him out, Dandy, an' when et's twice told you kin cut off his gaffs an' chuck him out'n ther pit."

He flourished the blade he held uplifted, and it hung so squarely over the sport that it seemed impossible he should draw a weapon before it would come down, while anything like a physical struggle with such a man appeared preposterous.

The one hand of Travers remained playing with the toothpick in his mouth, and slowly the other hand came up as the

fellow addressed as Dandy began to count. His voice sounded full of harsh laughter, but Harold Mowrey noted that he was watching Travers like a hawk.

The hand crept up a little higher. Then, how it was done was hard to tell, but as it lingered a trifle at his neck the fingers twisted out a blade as bright, and perhaps as long as that flourished by Game Bill.

It came around with a sweep, knocking aside the one held by his antagonist, and for an instant Travers held the life of the man from Sandusky at his mercy. With the point aimed straight at the broad, defenseless breast, it looked as though he was going to strike downward.

The blow did not fall, however.

With a catlike spring Travers leaped to one side, exclaiming:

"Room there! Give me room according to my size, or I'll have to cut it out. This fool wants another lesson, and I'll have to give it to him."

Game Bill looked at the smaller man in something like amazement.

With the advantage in his favor, he believed the stranger would shoot, but imagined he would never dare to face his knife; and he hardly yet believed it was a serious matter.

Some of the spectators thought it was, for they slipped to this side and that, making the room Travers demanded, while the constantly increasing crowd stood outside of the ring thus formed, with necks craned forward.

Then Game Bill plunged forward, and there was a clang of steel on steel.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WORK OF A MASTER.

It was no particular business of Harold Mowrey, but with the innocent freshness he had all along been showing, he had to be well up at the front, and naturally his position was just at the rear of the stranger sport who had registered as Charley Travers.

He probably knew, as well as the rest of the crowd, that steel might be dropped and lead begin to fly at any stage in the game, but like the rest he took his chances. And having a front pew himself, he was willing that Travers should have all the room he wanted, and that at least he should not be crowded from the rear.

Game Bill was no novice with the knife, though it must be confessed he depended more on strength, weight and reach than on skill in the art of fence.

He leaned forward, glaring fiercely into the face of the smaller sport, and it was a wonder with the crowd how the latter expected to reach him.

There was a confident smile on his face, however, and his eyes never left those of the man facing him, in spite of the fact that he was a stranger in the place, and facing a man who evidently had pards who were willing to back his game.

And before many seconds had elapsed it was a sure thing he was a perfect master of his weapon.

Even the friends of Game Bill were not slow to express their admiration for the stranger sport who was doing such brilliant work.

Bill himself began to understand how the game was running, and a hunted look came on his face, short time though it had been since he was all confidence and braggadocio.

He tried one more trick, and while keeping his eyes on those of the sport, he made a lung that was only a feint, and at the same time kicked out with wicked strength.

A hoot went up from the mob, followed by a shout.

The huge foot never reached the mark it was aimed for, and Travers, while parrying with his knife hand, caught the upraised ankle with the other, and then gave a heave.

It required no great strength to tumble the bully to the ground, and then Travers brought his own foot into requisition, and deftly kicked the wrist which held the knife of the fallen man.

The blade went spinning into the air, and Bill was at the mercy of his opponent.

The crowd stood back no longer.

There was a rush forward from all sides.

"Don't yer touch him, stranger! We'll finish ther job. 'Tain't w'uth while fur you ter muss yer hands. Git a blanket, some un'."

Two or three seized the prostrate man and drew him away. It was not certain whether they wanted to save him or the sport, but the call for a blanket was speedily answered by the appearance of one, and the next instant a dozen men had hold of the edges, and Game Bill was tossing in the air.

Up and down he went, and when the first dozen got tired there was another dozen to take its place. No one had any open sympathy for the defeated champion, and every one appeared to enjoy the horse-play. It was better than a circus.

Charley Travis folded his arms and stepped back, breathing a little heavily.

Easy though it all had looked, he had been doing downright hard work, and no one knew better than himself on what a slender thread his hold of life had been hanging.

As for farther danger—he had not thought of it. The friends of Game Bill had become quiet, and he judged they were conspicuous by their absence.

It was something of a surprise, then, when he heard a spat right at his shoulder, and a man went tumbling by him, who ploughed up the ground right in front, and dropped a wicked-looking bowie knife as he fell.

He understood better the warning cry which had just been arising from several men in front. One of the bully's friends had been in reach after all, and had been trying to get in his work.

Travers turned sharply around.

Harold Mowrey was there, glancing solemnly at his knuckles.

"W—w—weally, b—b—beg pardon for interfering, but I thought it w—w—was t—t—time t—t—to talk."

"And you talked in the best way to do good. Thanks. I'd sooner you hadn't, but I'll try and remember it in your favor. You meant well enough, but it may break my streak, that has been climbing toward high-water mark right along."

"Might s—s—set him up and t—t—try it again."

"Oh, I am little, and I'm good; but not that good. Let it go at that. I can take care of him if he wants to even up, and that will put us somewhere nigh to level."

But the fellow did not wait for further complications.

He hardly touched the ground when he was up again, tumbling forward into the crowd, which closed around him again, and it would have been hard to pick him out without getting a glimpse first of a lump that was rising on the back of his head a little behind one ear.

When the men who were tossing the bully in the blanket got tired of the fun, and thought he had enough of it, they gave him some good advice and allowed him to stagger off to his lair.

By that time Travers and Harold Mowrey had both disappeared, and the throng drifted away from in front of the Eden, much to the satisfaction of Rahter, who at one time feared the end would be the sacking of his place.

Harold and the stranger sport went away together.

Travers had watched his man disappearing, and then turned to Mowrey.

"Say, pard, in my line of life we generally play a lone hand, and go for all the stakes in sight, but you did me a good turn back yonder at the Eden, and I wouldn't mind saying that some time I may be able to give you a pointer; and if I can I'll do it."

"Weally."

Harold lifted his eyebrows, and then looked puzzled.

"Oh, come now. If you think you can run your little game without the world catching on to it you are as innocent as

you over. Fact is, we're both on the same level, and there is no reason why we shouldn't do each other a good turn when the chance comes."

"C—c—consider it d—d—done. What then?"

"Nonsense. If you must know it, I am a detective; and you and I are both looking for Hugh Brander."

"Weally!"

CHAPTER XVII.

WORD FROM THE DESERT.

"I understand your game exactly; and there is no reason why I shouldn't help in it, because it would be just so much water on my wheel if you succeeded in finding him."

"B—b—but what do you want with him?"

Without attempting to deny the impeachment, Mowrey asked his question, and the answer came promptly.

"It's actually supposed to be a secret, but out here there can be no harm in telling it, especially if we are both going to pull together. There have been some quiet developments, and it's almost dead open and shut that Brander is the man who didn't, and somebody else was the man who did. And we want him to prove that last, and clear himself."

"Rather l—l—late in the day, ain't it?"

"Better late than never. But, you understand, we're not caring particularly about him. What we want is to get onto the other man."

They were talking in an average tone, and without any reference to who might be in hearing, but neither of them seemed prepared for an interruption, and both looked up sharply when it came.

"Say, pard, would yer mind sayin' that name ag'in?"

The speaker was an elderly-looking man, roughly dressed, but without a particularly bad face. He seemed like a veteran prospector just in off of a jaunt which had brought him no great fortune.

There was a look of puzzled interest in his eyes, and yet something about him said that he was not speaking altogether from idle curiosity.

"Wouldn't mind it a bit if I wanted to; but I'm not sure I can afford to give you points unless I know your game. Who are you?"

"Bless yer soul, young fresh; it ain't my pot I want ter git ter bollin'. I'm jest old Jack Riggs, what's wandered 'round these hyar regions sence afore you war' born'd. What I don't know 'bout 'em ain't w'uth knowin', an' I 'xpect ter keep on in ther same good way tell I pass ther range. I war jest thinkin' mebber I could put yer on a trail ef yer wanted ter foller et."

"There are trails and there are other trails, and you may be more anxious to follow mine than I to know anything about yours. You can't most always sometimes tell how far a frog will jump by the length of his tail. What firm are you working for?"

"Do I look like er blamed derective?" snorted the old fellow, in some heat.

"Ef I did I allow I wouldn't be kickin' ter be called a durned, av'ridge fool. When I'm goin' somewhar', an' don't know ther road, I know a cussed sight better than ter fall out with ther galootez does. Find him yerself—an' you'll be a thunderin' long time a doin' ov it."

Riggs turned away in a passion, and yet with a certain amount of dignity. He was sober, as they could plainly see, and seemed to speak from his heart. It was Mowrey who interrupted him.

"S—s—say, old gent! D—d—didn't want to hurt your f—f—feelings, but a stranger, in a strange land, don't you know, has to go slow. You look honest, and if you can g—g—give us any information I wouldn't mind promising w—w—what they call a g—g—grub stake. Sit d—d—down and talk it over."

Riggs came back and took the offered seat.

"Now open out," said Travers, brusquely.

"In the East the man we were talking of was known as Hugh Brander, but out here he has been going by the name of

Smith. Can you locate him for us, and if you think you can, why so?"

"That's ther name, sure ez guns. I can't locate him prezackly, but I 'xpeck I kin put yer on, ther way ter find his bones ef yer don't mind ther reesks ov layin' your'n 'longside ov 'em. It stan's ten ter one thet he's passed in his checks."

"Dead! P—p—poor fellow. How?"

Mowrey had never seen the man of whom he spoke in such regretful accents, for in some way fate had kept them apart. He had been abroad during the brief period of Marion's wedded life. Yet he felt this was another instance of the irony of fate.

"Mind yer, I'm sayin' all ther chances look that way, but I may be clean off. You ever hear ov Lone Spring Jed?"

Harold gave a negative nod, but Travers looked up sharply, though he did not say a word.

"He hez a leetle layout, down yander in ther desert. Thar's a spring thar', an' a leetle green grass 'round it, an' jest one tree thar' by itself. He's b'in squat-tin' thar' fur more years back than I kin tell yer, jist a livin' by hisself, an' a rak-in' in what ther desert sends him. You wouldn't a thunk what all kim's to him—an' it ain't everybody ez knows, fur Jed are close-mouthed."

"W—w—weally. I don't see what much there is to come, unless it's sand."

"Thar's a heap ter kim', sonny. It's mos'ly burros; an' they don't kim' empty handed. Say not, pard!"

Riggs looked up at Travers, who he seemed to think would understand him better.

"That's so, old man. I have heard of Jed, since you speak of him, and I know what you mean."

"Yaas. Thar's month arter month men goes in thar' a perspectin'. Mebbe they strike et rich, an' mebbe they don't. They never tell. Ther men lies down, an' ther burros lies down; but ther men dies, an' ther burros git up ag'in an' strike fur water. They kim' trailin' inter that lone spring, an' more ner half ther time they bring a pack with 'em. An' Jed, he goes fer ther outfit, an' sen's word 'round ef thar's anything ter show wher' they kim' from—an' mos'ly thar' ain't. An' hesell's ther burro ter some other durned fools at ther nearest camp, an' mebbe gits 'em two or three times over. An' that's ther way I kim', ter hear ov Hugh Brander. Thar' war' a burro kim' in, an' it hed a pack, an' somewhar' in it war ther name ov that same party. Jed tole me."

"And you think Jed knows something about where that burro left its owner, and who that owner might be?"

"Don't think it; know it. Ef he can't thar's nobody ez kin. Ef yer lookin' fur a man ov that name see Jed. It's ye'r best hold, an' ye'r only one ez fur ez I know. An' ef ye'r wants ter try a whirl in the sand I wouldn't mind goin' along of ye'r kin afford a first-class outfit. It's death ter start with ary other."

"Thanks for the yarn," said Travers, thoughtfully, as he spun a ten-dollar gold piece on the table in front of Riggs.

"It's worth that, anyway; and we'll talk the matter over. There may be some mistake about it, though I'm sure you are honest enough about the yarn as you tell it. I'll see you again this evening. It's a trip one don't want to take unless on a sure scent. And if he is really dead there is a question whether we would fare better on the same trail."

"So long, then. I'm stopping hyar a day or two ter rest up, an' I won't be hard ter find."

Riggs got up and strolled away. He understood the two wanted to be alone to talk over the intelligence just received; and he was burning up with a desire to break the ten he had received. He had lately come in dead broke, and was looking for a grub stake. The chance thrown in his way appeared to be a wonderful one, and he was willing to work it to the best advantage.

Mowrey looked after him a little suspiciously. He did not understand the story any too well, and was inclined to

think it one of the fairy tales he had heard of.

He said as much, but Travers, on whom the intelligence had produced more effect than he had hitherto allowed to appear, took a different view.

"You're wrong there. I know of this Riggs, who is simply an honest old prospecting fool, and I've heard of Lone Spring Jed. What hurts me is, if Brander took that trip and lost that burro, then he's passed in, sure."

"But if so, we'll find his grave?"

"Yes, if you're game for it—or we'll drop along the road there, and send our burros back to Lone Spring Ned. And the chances for that same last will be mighty much good. I don't like the contract myself."

CHAPTER XVIII.

ANOTHER ARRIVAL.

The two had talked together without much regard to being overheard.

This thing of finding a dead man was not one likely to interest outsiders. If it had been a prospect trail they were going to make, and had there been any talk of a find at the other end, they would have spoken of it in bated whispers.

Any hint that they had something of that kind in view would have insured them a lot of undesirable followers. Less than that has started a rush from a camp, where there were hundreds struggling to get in.

Overheard they were, however.

Steve Worley had not lost track of the Flying Dude, as he called him, and had been waiting for a chance, though he did not believe it would be likely to come before night. He had been one of the crowd which gathered in front of the Eden to witness the fight between Game Bill and the new arrival at the hotel.

He tried to slip up in the rear of Mowrey at that time, to be ready for any chance which might offer, but somehow the young man kept moving in such a way as always to hold him at the side, and even when the blow was struck which brought about the introduction with Travers, luck or instinct kept him well out of the way of the would-be assassin.

When the two walked away together Steve followed them at a little distance, and smiled all over when he located them at Bob Bingley's. If there was one place more than another where he would delight to raise a row it was at Bob's.

Luck was against him, however. There seemed to be no opening for a time for foul play, and when they seated themselves, and he had lounged near enough to hear something of their talk, he became interested in the conversation, and would not have stopped it if he could.

When it was over, and the two sauntered off after the agreement which closed the last chapter, he struck straight for the cabin of Ad Lane.

If he could have seen the dubious smile on the face of the sport in disguise he might not have been just as comfortable in his mind as he thought he was.

"It's going to take some coin to set up an outfit," said Travers, in a confidential tone.

"But the gang at home pay for that, and there's no reason why you shouldn't take advantage of it, especially if funds are a trifle short. And the very first thing for you to do is to come with me. That sort of a rig may be all right farther back, but it hardly passes here; and farther on it won't go down at all. Three days in the saddle would break you wide open."

Harold admitted that much to himself, but he did not understand what his newly made friend was going to do until he found himself steered into a shanty which turned out to be a shop just opened by a pilgrim "sheeny," who had within the confines of his den more things than Mowrey had dreamed of finding in the town.

"Get behind the curtain and crawl yourself into that," said Travers, pointing to an entire change of rig which Moses had hauled out.

"With that long hair of yours, and a little dirt on your face, you won't look so

bad behind a pair of sixes. In that Prince Albert you look just like what they call you here—a flying dude."

Harold had some objections to the change, but they did not weigh with the reasons in its favor, and he finally submitted. When he came out he looked a good deal less like a dandy, but a good deal more in place in a camp like Paradise Point.

"D—d—don't feel half bad, b—b—but I wonder w—w—what Marion will say?"

As he swaggered along the street he thus hinted to Travers the thought troubling his mind.

"Marion! Who's she? One of the ladies I saw you with at the table?"

"Y—y—yes. And, to be honest with you, she's the p—p—party I represent. I'm g—g—going anyhow, b—b—but I wouldn't wonder if she would take a notion to come t—t—to."

"That so? See here, pard, if I'm taking you in with me on the ground floor it ought to be halves. What do you say—provided I earn it?"

"C—c—can't say till I talk to Marion. If she's agreed it will b—b—be all right."

"See her, then, by all means; and there's nothing like seeing her now. I'll go and get things in shape, and you can let me know later on. And, see here, all this dead-set against you is not for nothing, and the job you got on hand is a heap bigger than you think. You keep out of any rows till I'm with you."

Harold was not inclined to quarrel with the advice, and was desirous of seeing his sister as soon as possible. The two separated, and Mowrey made his way to the hotel.

His appearance without warning brought out a shout of dismay, for Marion did not at once recognize him.

After that came much laughter. He made a rather good-looking sport; and Paradise Point, knowing something of what he had been doing since he struck the town, would be more apt to think the other costume a freak than this.

But after the laugh was over Marion grew grave, for her brother told his story in a straightforward way, without any attempt to soften the directness of the blow.

He had met a man who had called himself a detective, who said he was on a search for Brander. While they talked an old prospector stumbled across them, who brought them news, and claimed to have heard from good authority that the much wanted man had perished in the desert. At least his pack burro had come in, bearing his effects.

"And what does this man propose to do?"

Marion's question showed that as yet she had not made up her own mind.

"G—g—go there and d—d—die too. That is about what I m—m—made out of the chances. And if you don't object I'm g—g—going along."

"We will all go!" exclaimed Marion, without hesitation.

"The word of no one else would satisfy me that he is dead; and if he is living, something tells me that I am the one to find it out. I would trust no one else with the work when I thought it would end at Paradise. Surely I would not pass it over into other hands now."

Harold pushed back his long hair and tugged at the ends of his mustache.

It was a case in which good advice was the proper thing; but he knew about how much effect that generally had on his headstrong sister, and he hardly knew what was best to say. If he objected to her plan it would make it a certainty; and if he indorsed it, his words might only confirm her in her present intentions.

"Speak! Say something!" she continued. "Surely you must know whether this story is to be believed; and if it is, whether there is a chance to find him alive. Poor Brander!"

"Weally."

It was no wonder Harold answered with his favorite expression.

A year before Marion would not have spoken in such a tone. Brander, then, was a man who, in her opinion, had done her the last wrong that could be thought of.

Now she spoke of him as one to be pitied, even if he had not been very hardly treated.

"Yes, really. I begin to believe you are not as worthless as I had thought. We have scarcely been acquainted with each other, you must confess. Do something to merit the favorable opinion I am forming. Help me in this crisis, and, however it may end, you shall not be forgotten."

In her excitement she began to pace the room, and would hardly have noticed a knock on the doorpost had not her brother held up his hand warningly, as he exclaimed:

"Come in!"

Primrose made his appearance.

"Beggin' pardon ef I introod', but I've b'in on ther scout fur nooze, and thar's b'in d'velopments. Brander hez b'in hyer, but he's went on through. Him an' a pard. Looks ez though you'd hev' all out doors ter hunt 'em in, but Unkel Bedrock kin find him ef he's 'bove ground. An' I reckon sure he are."

"Which way should you say he had gone?"

"Looks mos'ly ez though he hed gone ter glory. Them ez takes ther route he was strikin' fur most frequent does. Otherwise, he's down in ther sand, some'rs, hevin' a good time."

"Then it was true what Harold heard? Not a day is to be lost! Make your preparations at once. We start to follow him to-morrow."

"I sh'd smile. We'll be right thar', though, fur ther most part, et takes money ter buy land, even out hyer."

"For a f—f—few hundreds count on me," interposed Harold.

Bedrock slapped him heartily on the back.

"Yer improvin' every holy minnit'. I wouldn't a thunk you war' there same galoot. Kim' right along an' we'll git an outfit. I'll guarantee that we'll make ther raffle yit. So long, madam. Thar' ain't no time ter lose, an' he kin be tellin' thet same yarn ez we go erlong."

He caught the young man by the elbow and fairly urged him out of the room. There were some signs of hysterics about Marion, and Primrose thought it would be best to leave her to the soothing ministrations of Linda Lyle.

Mowrey dropped a good deal of his drawl, and something of his stutter, as he told of his interview with the individual sailing under the name of Charley Travers.

He was not inclined to pin his faith on the stranger, but so far it seemed as though the meeting had been for good.

"Don't reckon he's all right. They mos'ly ain't," was the opinion of Bedrock.

"But that don't cut no big figger. When y'er unkel 'ranges ther traces he gin'rally works sich cattle fur all they're w'uth. Better let me get a glimp' ov him an' I kin tell yer more."

They found on consideration, however, that there was no stated direction in which to look for him; and as they strolled aimlessly down the street they became aware of some little excitement just in front of the Four X Brand, and turned their steps thither.

When they came up to the front of the saloon the most of the crowd had gone inside, but there was left standing there the ugliest, scrawniest burro it had ever been their luck to lay eyes on.

Its bones stuck out until they threatened to cut their way through the skin, and if it had not lately been on the verge of starvation its appearances terribly lied.

"What's ther racket?" asked Bedrock of a man who was considering the animal after a curious fashion.

"Jake Jukes jest got in. B'in lost in ther desert, an' left his pard thar'. Man by ther name ov Brander."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MAN WHO HAD BEEN THERE.

Jake Jukes was just being supported from the bar when the two entered.

He seemed to be known there, and there were many manifestations of pity, and desires to hear the story of his wanderings.

If anything, he looked worse than the burro.

"It's a awful yarn, pards, an' ther w'ust ov it are that I can't tell it even yit without wantin' ter let go all holts, an' slide along ther flume. That's ther way I war' goin' so long it really 'pears I can't stop, nohow."

"Brace up, Jake," said a pitying friend, holding his hand steadily.

"Jest tell it ez though you war'n't thar', fur we're dyin' ter know what sorter luck yer b'in havin'."

"Ye'r dyin' ter know ef we struck color, and ef I told yer a lie this hyer camp'd be half empty to-morrer mornin' ov men ez'd go an' lay ther bones down fur what they wouldn't find. We found color, I'll edmit, but that war' about all. An' ef I hed a bead on ther howlin' An-nernias ez floated ther yarn ez took us down that trail ter death I'd pull trigger only too quick."

"That's all right, of course; but how was it? Give us ther p'int, an mebbe we won't be fooled that way some time."

"Yes, yer will. It's human natur'. But hyer they be."

"I'd b'in that way afore, more fool me, an' thought I could strike a course ter hit ther p'int we war' almin' at, an' take in a water hole 'thin twenty mile or less."

"Yer see, thar' war' a man by ther name ov—well, he sailed 'round ez Smith, but it don't make much differens' what yer calls ther poor feller now."

"Thar' didn't seem ter be much green in his eye, an' his huffs had wore down ter be tolerable tuff trampin' over this hull western creashun, so I didn't think it war' all wind an' taffy when he struck me with a yarn he'd picked up 'bout that country down thar'. He se'd he hed heard I knowed more 'bout that land ov death than most, an' thet I war' the kid he war' lookin' fur."

"I told him I hed b'in thar', an' got away alive, but nothin' ter brag on, but it'd take an almighty big show fur pay dirt ter git me thar' ag'in."

"Then he told me that's jest what he had in view, an' went on with his yarn."

"Seems, two men went in thar', an' struck it rich, an' then fell out. One ov 'em went up with his boots on, an' t'other war' badly skinned, but he got away with ther biggest kind of speermins. Smith, he struck him out on a hunt, an' did ther best he could, but ther feller war' too fur gone, betwixt a bad cut in the lung an' hard lines in ther desert, an' arter he'd told his yarn, an' give Jack a few chunks ter sw'ar by, up an' klicked ther bucket."

"Jack told off ther route ez good ez he could remember, an' ez I s'ed afore, I thought I seen ther chance, an' we figgered it all out, an' let on we war' comin' ter Paradise P'int, but slunk off in ther night when we got hyer with ther f'ust ov ther rush."

"Ther rest ov it you kin-jedge."

"I struck my lan'marks, as I thunk, an' he struck hissen, but somewhar' they didn't connect. Ef I'd only knowed what I found out when it war' too late I could 'a' injineered it through all right. I b'lieve I kin waltz right thar' now, an' back ag'in, an' never turn a hair, but I didn't do it then, by a blamed sight."

"When we found we hedn't struck as good dirt ez we lef' behind at Paradise it broke us all up, an' that war' ther time he give it away ez his name was Brander—Hugh Brander."

"We'd b'in without water fur a day—an' b'in short on it fur a week—an' when night kim' on he jest went ravin' mad an' laid hisself down on ther sand, an' tole me ter give 'em all his love, an' say he went up ther flume."

"Pards, I tried my best ter git that man ter show his grit, but he jest lay thar' a singin' an' a lookin' up at ther stars, an' all ther time it war' life an' death with us. I tied up one leg ov his burro ez good ez I could, so it couldn't leave him tell he had a chance ter change his mind, an' then I put out. I hed ter do it. Pards, I say, what'd you done? It war' rough, I know, but I couldn't stay thar' an' die, could I, now?"

There was a pitiful ring in his voice as

he appealed to his audience, and one could have sworn that he shivered as he thought of the man he had called pard lying out alone in the desert night singing madly to the stars.

The men there knew how it was themselves. They had all heard of such cases, and of some that were worse. It was a hard thing to do, a cruel thing, and yet, why should both die?

Did the other die, though? Stranger though he was to the crowd in general there was a wonderful interest started, which was none the less because some of it members fancied the speaker had not been telling the exact truth in regard to their find.

They could believe all the rest, and had both the wanderers escaped there might have been no doubts. Murmurs ran around.

"Poor fellow! It's odds there war' sign right where he laid down, and he just smelt 'em. It 'most always works that way."

"Failure always means the eve of success," put in another, who seemed to be out of place in that crowd.

"There's a mine within a mile. That's the rule."

"Sure you didn't find it, Jake?"

"Not so fur as I kin recommember. Ef you kin tell me what I done ther nex' three days you'll say a heap more ner I kin. Me an' Jenny pulled through. That's all I know."

"And the other chap didn't?"

"That's the way we'll hev' ter say it. I've hearn that a burro thet must hev' b'in hissen come inter Lone Spring Jed's. I'm goin' down thar' ter see it soon ez I reit, ter make sure. But he didn't come with it. Yer knows what thet means."

"Means dollars fur Jed. He do hev' ther luck ov ther old boy. Wouldn't mind jumpin' his claim some time myself. It's a dead sure thing ter ketch 'em, an' ef some of them burros ez kim's his way ain't loaded down to ther guards with dust you kin call me a liar."

"Mebbe yes, an' mebbe no, but you'll never jump Lone Jed's claim. It'll take a crow with grit in it ter crow 'round that ranch. Ef Jed lifted his gun, you—sho! You wouldn't be in it!"

An angry retort followed, and it looked as though there was going to be war at once. Harold had listened with deep interest to the story as it was told, and while the wrangle of the outsiders was going on would have interviewed Jukes in the hope of obtaining further information.

Primrose gave him a touch and a shake of the head.

"I wouldn't, pard, I reely wouldn't. Let him tell ther same lies over two er three times, an' see how they hang together. Be time enough then ter ax him ter make up a few more."

"B—b—but why shouldn't it be the t—t—truth?"

"Never mind that. Jest lay back an' see whar' he peddles his goods the next time. Jake never tells ther truth, even fur rocks, an' thar's more rocks fur talkin' t'other way, jest now. Hold on tell he tries ter borry a quarter."

The advice seemed to come from a man of wisdom, and Harold accepted it without protest.

He was glad of it a minute later when, on stepping outside, Charley Travers came up to them with a cheerful nod.

"Looks as though we were striking it rich, in the language of such as that monumental liar we were listening to. We'll have him down fine, though, before we get through. I'm getting up the outfit, and you'll refund half the cost. This gentleman going along?"

He nodded familiarly to Bedrock, who grinned amiably.

"So reported. But wherein did ther lie consist?"

"If Brander—you know all about him, I suppose—is dead, this fellow killed him. When we find the corpse we'll have him down fine. When we see who he connects with at this end of the line we'll know who paid for the job. See?"

"Mebbe we better git on his trail,

"That's a hull basketful ov wisdom in what you're sayin', an' when he slides out he'll go quick an' lively."

"Don't worry about that. My friend here, Mowrey, knows my business, and if I say it myself, I understand it right through the whole alphabet. I have a man on his track now that he won't shake off in a hurry, and one that won't be suspected, either. Let you know what he says when he gives in his report, though I wouldn't wonder if I could say over the left of it now. Oh, I'm right in town on this case, and don't mean to miss a point that is in the cards."

That appeared to settle it, and they dropped the thought of Jukes, and began to talk over the trip and its preparations. Travers assured them that he had things "on a string," and that they needn't worry. If everything else was ready in the morning for a start for Lone Spring Jed's, the outfit would be there. It was a question with him whether they wanted either Jukes or Jack Riggs, but circumstances would determine whether either of them were to be in the party.

It took some time to get over all the ground, and Harold went back to Marion at last able to tell her how the land lay, so that she could prepare herself for the journey of the following day, if she still insisted on taking it.

He found his sister somewhat excited over a mysterious communication which had turned up in some unexplained way at the office.

It was addressed to her, and Rahter had found it sticking in one corner of the looking glass, though he would have sworn that no one earthly had put it there.

He had been in front of that glass when it was not there, no one else had been near it, yet when he went there again the letter had been posted. It was a mystery he could not understand, and as he handed the letter over to Mrs. Mowrey he remarked in not the evenest tone of voice in the world that there was something which had been brought by spirits.

He did not wait for any response, and until the door closed behind him Marion stood looking over the envelope in a hesitating, half-wondering way.

Then she opened it, glanced over the writing, and before she had mastered a sentence gave a cry which brought Linda Lyle to her side in genuine alarm.

"It is a message from the dead!" cried Marion, holding the page high above her head.

"Brander is dead, yet this letter was written by his hand."

"Oh, come, dear. You must be mistaken. Read it, and that will tell you the meaning of it all. It must be only a resemblance."

The advice was too good not to be taken, and Marion, composing her nerves, hastily ran over the contents of the communication.

CHAPTER XX.

TRAPPED.

"You have no doubt heard the several stories brought into camp this day in regard to Hugh Brander. They are partly true and partly false, but if you value the lives of yourself and friends, allow other parties to do the sifting. On no account suffer yourself to be led away on a search for the body. I pledge you my solemn word that it would be dangerous, and that if the body of Brander is to be found you shall see it if you remain quietly where you are until others have done their duty in the matter."

"A FRIEND."

In this way ran the letter, and it was a warning that it might be well to heed. The strangest thing about it was that the more she looked at it the less the writing, which had been done with a lead pencil, appeared to resemble that of her one-time husband.

And yet, how did the writer know those stories were partly true, and partly false?

And, unless she went on the quest, how did she, or would she, know if the body of Brander was to be found or not?

And who was this person who signed himself "A Friend"? Surely, this could not

be a trick of Harold's to keep her from taking what she admitted might well be a dangerous journey.

Her brother might have even imitated the handwriting for a purpose. Probably he knew something about it. One thing only was sure to her mind, now she had time to think over it.

The writing was not that of Hugh Brander. There were several little mannerisms in it which seemed familiar, but they might be accidental, and they had deceived her because, in her excited state, the words of the landlord had made a deeper impression than they should have done.

"It is good advice," she said, more calmly, "but I do not intend to take it, though I would give a fair reward to know who wrote it."

"Of course you won't take it," answered Linda, looking up from the letter Marion had handed to her.

"And for that reward—you can keep it in your pocket. I think I can name the individual, even if I don't know where to look for him to point him out. It was Uncle Jack."

"It might be—it must be. Yet, why was it written? Is it to test my obstinacy, or is it really for the sake of the reasons on the face of it? Perhaps he means to bring the body here if it is recovered."

"With the hand he is playing, and the stakes on the board, it would pay him," mused Linda.

"That is, if the body he finds is really Brander's, and if there has been no foul play which can be traced to him."

"That is it. Go we must, whether he wronged me in life, or I him, in his death he shall be avenged if that death calls for it."

They talked without reserve, and it was nothing to them that the wall gave no great privacy. What matter to them was it if they were overheard?

The arrival of Harold to say that Primrose was ready for the journey, and that his newly-found friend was arranging matters for the trip, was rather a relief, and as supper came along shortly after, the young man managed to neglect to tell the yarn brought in by Jukes. He was not sure he had altogether done his duty in that matter, and so did not care to mention it at all.

Charley Travers did not put in an appearance at the table, and even Primrose failed to show his face. Whether they were going to make the journey together or not in the morning, the young man appeared to be thrown on his own resources for the evening, and without hesitation left the Eden shortly after the lamps were lighted.

If the streets were thronged during the day, the town seemed riotous by night.

The doors were all wide open at the saloons, and there were a dozen or more of them which Harold had not as yet even noticed.

From one to another little crowds of men were roaming, while other crowds surrounded the bars, or sat and stood at the tables where wealth was changing hands to the rattle of the "bones" or the flip, flip of the cards.

At more than one point he heard the noise of a brawl in progress, and at Bob Bingley's there was a mild shooting affair just as he reached the door, and a man was being helped away by a couple of his faithful friends.

For a young man who had gone the pace that he had during his short residence in town, the night air was really unhealthy, but Harold never seemed to think of that. There was a chance of meeting Riggs again, and in default of anything better, Mowrey felt like having an interview.

He went in without the shadow of a hesitation.

In the afternoon on one seemed to notice his appearance; to-night it was different.

A regular howl of recognition arose.

Hyer's ther man ez plastered Ad Lane, an' he's goin' ter drink with this crowd, sure!"

"He looks like a white man now, an'

don't you furgit it. Ef Ad hedn't b'in fooled on his outfit he wouldn't 'a' hed a doctor's bill ter pay."

"Met yer at ther Brand last night. Mebbe yer remembers? All friends ov yourn hyer, an' willin' ter risk big money that you could lay over Stenwinder hisself ef it came to a show down. What'll you have?"

That was the way they talked to him, and the last speaker laid his hand familiarly on the arm of the newcomer and gently urged him toward the bar.

The rest of that particular crowd pushed their way along so as to keep within reaching distance.

The reception did not throw Harold off his guard.

He knew the place he was in for what it was, and had little faith in the loyalty of the men who were claiming to be his friends. They were not honest miners by a long shot, and when they were certain that he was not of their own stamp would hold him as fair game.

Loud talk, heavy drinking, and short cards at the tables in the out of the way portions of the room were the rule of the house, and as he came up to the bar there was a discussion going on which ended in a sudden knock-down argument.

A tall, ungainly sort of a fellow dropped right at Mowrey's feet, the blood streaming from his nose, and two or three men were following it up with a wicked rush, kicking as they came. In a minute they would have stamped the face of the downed man beyond recognition.

It was none of Harold's quarrel, and he knew nothing of the rights of the case. It was probably a tail end of the shooting affair which had occurred just before his entrance.

But he did not stop to consider.

Two or three on one, and the one down, was more than he could stand back and see, while there was no time to investigate.

The intended victim was trying to scramble to his feet, while his victors were kicking savagely, yet there was only a second or two lost.

Mowrey stooped, darted out his hands, and secured a grip on the collar and thigh of the downed man, and then, with one prodigious wave of strength, fairly swung him up from the floor and landed him on the bar in a sitting posture.

"T-t-t-b-w-weally!" sputtered Harold.

"H-h—hold hard!"

And with hands up in a position that was equally adapted for attack or defense, he faced the disappointed roughs.

They did not wait to consider who had balked them, but charged straight ahead after just an instant of recoil to gather strength.

Mowrey struck out once, as hard as he knew how, and that was all.

From all sides the crowd seemed to suddenly close up around him, crushing in toward the center with irresistible weight, and then, from behind, an arm shot around his neck, the wrist of it being grasped by the other hand of the thug, and Mowrey felt the regular garroter's grip tightening on his throat.

The thought flashed upon him that his assailant must be one of the men who had been urging him to the bar, and that was about all that he had time for.

With that infernal pressure on windpipe and jugular his senses melted away, and he collapsed before the man he had hit could regain his feet.

In one way it was perhaps as well for him that he did. There was a man looking for him, and he swung a revolver as he looked, but by that time Mowrey had disappeared.

How he went no one exactly knew, but it was not far to a back door, and there seemed to be some sort of an understanding to pass him along. In less time than it takes to tell it he was out in the open air, in the rear of the saloon, and was being borne rapidly away.

The journey he made between his captors was not a long one. They approached a substantial cabin cautiously from the rear, and having made certain there was

no one near to take observations, they carried him in.

By that time the cool night air had begun to restore his senses, and he became dimly conscious of what was passing around him.

He heard a coarse voice rumble:

"Hyee he be, boss. He's crawlin' back ter life, an' ef yer gives him a show, in 'bout a holy minnit he'll tune up mighty lively. Better hev' me put ther steel in an' be done with it."

"Let him crawl. He's got ter talk first. After that I don't care how soon he croaks, but I don't want him to do it here. Blind-fold his eyes, and keep your hand ready to cut off a yell, and then let him simmer. The rest of you stand ready. He's a terror when he tries to travel."

CHAPTER XXI.

AGAINST LONG ODDS.

The voice of the man who had been addressed as "boss" sounded unnatural, as though the tone might be disguised; but the other was in an habitual key, and was entirely strange.

Though Harold had not a doubt that the three men who greeted him on his entrance to Bingley's had played him false, he suspected that none of them were in this gang.

It was a shrewd guess to make at a time when his wits were scarcely back, and a heavy muffler was pressing around his head on the level of his eyes, but he hit the truth exactly.

When he shot out into the night these men were waiting for him, and got in their work with a promptness which showed the affair had been planned beforehand.

And his ears were sharp enough to detect every footfall made in that room.

The boss stood watching him as he seemed to be slowly gasping his way back to life, and did not suspect that even already the Flying Dude was playing a part, and planning for the near future when he would be able to seize a chance to make things very lively, indeed.

With an extra gasp the young man straightened himself up into a sitting posture. His hands had been hastily tied, and the muffler over his eyes shut out all view of the surroundings, but he faced directly toward the man who was looking down upon him with an ugly scowl.

"Young man, do you know where you are?" asked the voice which tried to squeak solemnly.

"W-w-weally, I w-w-wouldn't wonder; b-b-but if my friends don't, I'm af-f-fraid I'm a lost l-l-lunatic."

Hopelessly, and very feebly, he sputtered out the words, without making an effort at a struggle. It sounded as though there had been a tremendous joke played on him and had quite taken away his breath.

"Your friends will never find you," continued the same voice.

"From the time you entered that door you were dead to all the earth. Unless you can prove your title to farther hours of life in a few minutes you will be dead, indeed."

"Hard lines f-f-for you, Uncle Jack," sighed Mowrey.

"They will be after your scalp, and I w-w-won't be able to t-t-tell them I didn't know it was you."

It was not exactly a chance shot of the young man, for he had arrived at an opinion by a train of rapid reasoning, and thought he might as well blurt it out.

It was a good shot, though only the one hearer understood it.

He was silent a few seconds, and then waived the matter altogether. When he began again it was on a totally different subject.

"What is behind this sudden search for Hugh Brander? What induced that woman, who hated him as the devil hates holy water, to come down here to this jumping off place of all the earth on a wild-goose chase like that; and how do you come to be in the game? Does she hire you, or is there some one else behind it all?"

"N-n-never pwove it by me, me boy. I d-d-don't know."

"There is no use in asking questions there are no answers to. You seem to think this is a joke; but it is one you will hardly want to laugh about when it is all over. You can speak the full truth now, or you will speak it a few minutes later with a vengeance."

There was a half-veiled threat that was more stern than harsher words would have made it. Harold knew something was coming to test his nerves and powers of endurance, but he calmly shook his head. That was easier than talking, and could be understood twice as well.

"Sorry for you, young man, but you are altogether too fly and too fresh. A man more or less swamped in the rush to Paradise Point will not count, and if you won't talk you must croak."

"Y-y-you said I was to do that, anyway," corrected the young man.

"That, of course, was conditional. The chance to save your life is open if you choose to take it. How shall it be?"

"Let her f-f-flicker."

"Fire up!" said the boss, tersely, and there was a movement from behind.

Four men bent over the Flying Dude—then he flew.

At least, if he did not fly, he tore around promiscuously; and in a way that was unexpected, and which they did not admire.

When the moment for torture seemed close at hand Mowrey thought it was time to extend himself, and he did it with a vengeance.

With a jerk he tore his hands apart, having already assured himself they were but loosely fastened.

Almost with the same movement he snatched the muffler from his eyes, and, springing from his sitting posture, launched himself at the man in front of him, who, in his first hasty glance, he was surprised to see was none other than Addison Lane.

It made his scheme all the easier to carry out.

So thoroughly had he seemed to be in their power that as yet they had neither searched nor disarmed him, and though Lane was on his feet again, he had nothing like the strength back again of which Mowrey's bullet the night before had temporarily robbed him.

The Flying Dude, in spite of his looks, was an athlete of no mean powers, and Addison Lane, under the circumstances, was little more than a child in his hands. Mowrey seized the boss, swung him around so as to bring him between him and the men, and at the same time, and almost in the same motion, whipped out a revolver.

The hammer went back under the quick pressure of his thumb, and the muzzle went boring into Lane's ear.

"B-b-back!" he shouted.

"Make a move and he dies. Then I'll c-c-cut l-l-loose on you!"

Just by so much as the men knew it was life or death with their late prisoner, they believed that he would do as he said, and they stared at him in evident bewilderment.

Lane was not so much astounded that he lost his head. He knew he was in the line of danger, but was willing to run the risks.

"No pistols, pards, but down him, hard!"

As he shouted the order he threw all his strength into the effort, and flung himself toward the floor.

The movement was so far successful that he measured his length in front of Mowrey without receiving a shot, while, as he dropped, his men sprang forward.

It was four against one, and they had but a few steps to take. It was as well to run the risks of the onward movement as to stand up to be shot at, and the drop was on no particular person when Lane drew his head out of the way. The odds were surely in their favor.

But then came a new factor in the game. The door swung open, and Stemwinder Saul sprang into the room, silent as a shadow, and as savage as death.

Well as he was occupied, and noiselessly as Saul came, Mowrey was aware of his presence before the other felt him, and thrust away his weapon.

It was just a jubilee clean-up for the two. Attacked in rear and front, one after the other went down before the lightning blows of the Flying Dude and his newly arrived help, and they did not have time to learn how it was done before it was all over.

"Make clear work while we are at it," coolly suggested Saul, as the last man went down.

"Just hold over them while I put the cinches on, and then we can interview them at our leisure. Maybe the talking won't be on one side after all."

Saul did not have to hunt long for material, and he did his work in a complete and expeditious fashion; while Mowrey stood with one foot on the shoulders of Addison Lane, and his muzzles trained on the men at large.

"There, blame you! you can kick, but you won't do much damage while we're looking at ye. Hop up here, and let's see how you all look! One at a time, and range along the wall so there'll be no confusion. No back talk. I mean business with a great big B."

Saul spoke sharply, and the revolvers of Harold Mowrey were backing him and his words. There was a growl from one or two, and one or two more lay as though senseless; but they were given no time for delay.

Saul caught the first man by the throat and dragged him up with a rough strength that could not be resisted, and which gave the rest an idea they were to be handled without gloves.

The fellow's head whacked back against the wall with a vigor which made him see more stars than there were in view outside.

Sullenly the rest came to time, and ranged along the wall, Addison Lane last of all.

"A g-g-good-looking gang," stuttered the Flying Dude; "b-b-but the l-l-lunatic is a little ahead on shape. We'll have that t-t-talk now."

Not a man answered a word. They were nervy villains, anyhow, and the time had not yet come to beg.

"Hold on, Mowrey, unless you have it n for them too big to wait. They really belong to you, but I'd like to have 'em."

"T-t-take 'em, but don't let any of them g-g-get away."

Saul lost the smile that had been on his face as he turned to Lane.

"Addison, my child, this banks up pretty fair for a starter, but it's just a pointer as to the trouble you are going to find every time you try to sand the deck and spring your cards. I want you to hear me warble a bit, and then you can think the matter over. You've given your game pretty well away, but there are points that need a little clearing up."

"Warble till you're tired. You know what my game was, and I don't care if the whole camp does, too. I wanted to get even with this fresh young man. If you hadn't chipped in he wouldn't have been much worse off for a big scare. The next time it may be something worse."

"Scare! You couldn't scare one side of him. And that is all wind. I'll leave him to hold his own end up, but what I want to know is, how much you paid Jake Jukes to come in with that yarn?"

"Not a cent. What is it to me?"

"More, perhaps, than you would want Paradise to know. I'll alter that question a trifle. How much was Jukes to get if he left that corpse out there where he says he did?"

"You're as crazy as your pard."

"There's method in my madness, anyhow. Now, a word of warning. If I find you, or any of this gang, prowling in my rear again, I'll shoot to kill; and you know what that means. And if I find that Jukes told a straight story, I'll hunt you down and kill you anyhow. Sabbe? So long!"

And leaving the five men trussed up like fowls ready for roasting, Stemwinder

Saul made a motion to Harold, who followed him without a word, and the two left the cabin.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FIRST DAY'S JOURNEY.

"In the name of all the saints and synagogues, what were you doing there?" questioned Saul as the two moved away, not without an occasional backward glance over their shoulders.

The five they had left behind were only bound at the wrists, and it would take them but a short time to get themselves entirely free, even if they had not done it already.

"W-w-went into Bingley's to l-l-look for Charley T-t-travers. They were downing that G-g-game B-b-bill again, and I took a hand in. T-t-that's all I k-k-know."

"Travers, eh? He looks like a nice young man for a side pard. I had a glimpse of him, and I should judge a little of him would go a great way. Take my advice and drop him."

"C-c-can't drop him. He's going along."

"Going where?"

"D-d-down yonder, s-s-somewheres. S-s-sort of minor Hades they c-c-call 'the desert.' Brander is dead, and we're going to l-l-look for him."

The Stemwinder halted and looked at the young man with his mouth half opened, as though he was going to say something.

He changed his mind, however, and went on in silence again. It was not far to the Eden Hotel, and they reached it without interruption. Then he put his hand on the shoulder of the Flying Dude.

"Little man, I know more about that country than you do, and I tell you solemnly, you better don't! Without a better guide than that Travers you will be lost there, sure. And those that get lost never come back."

"Oh, he's g-g-going to f-f-furnish the outfit, and we'll take a man along that knows it all by name. P-p-primrose you c-c-call him."

"Um! That's a shade better. Tie to him. But don't you trust any one else, and you'll have a fighting chance. He does have the luck of the old boy, and if he can't see through a millstone, there's no use for any one else to try. So long! I've got some points to play or I'd try to post you up, and be around to see you off. But freeze on to Bedrock. He's your only uncle, now!"

He held out his hand and grasped that of the young man with a friendly grip. Then he was gone.

Mowrey stood for a moment watching him melt away in the darkness, and as he stood, Travers came gliding up.

"Say, old man, you really did that thing well. I would have been around myself if I hadn't seen Stemwinder sailing in. Of course I staid out then and let the racket proceed without me. He might have made a mistake, and that wouldn't have been a little bit jolly. He hits hard enough to drive a spike."

"Weally."

Mowrey was not inclined to talk over the affair, especially as he did not know how much of it his lately-made friend had seen.

"Yes; but let it go at that. I was on the hunt for you. Things are ready for the trip, and I've seen the man you call Primrose myself. See the madam, and if she is still in the mind, be on hand for an early start. It's a ghastly sort of a picnic, but you must understand it's a big thing for me to have such company. If she don't recognize the remains we'll know enough to look somewhere else."

"And if she d-d-does?"

"It will depend on circumstances; but I suspect Jake Jukes will have a hard road to travel."

After that they had some little conversation in regard to the trip, and then separated.

Harold had no great desire for further experience of the amenities of Paradise society, for that night at least. As he had no doubt he would be dragged off at

an unearthly hour in the morning, he thought it best to put in the early part of the night in taking his rest.

It is enough to say that when he saw Marion she never wavered in her intention, and accepted the statement that all things were ready for the journey without question.

Ready they were, too, and Harold was more disgusted than surprised when called out of his bed to take his breakfast by the light of a couple of dimly burning lamps.

Rahter himself was around to attend to the comfort of the party, and stared at Marion with a sadness that was wickedly amusing to Mowrey, who noticed it at once.

Somehow Rahter had caught on to some of the facts in the case, and actually took the trouble to crawl out and see them off, without ever saying anything about his bill. Perhaps it was sympathy; and, more likely, it was because Stemwinder Saul was supposed to be a guarantee.

But at all events, he gave a cordial invitation to stop there as they came back.

Marion looked over the little party without surprise.

She was accustomed to having things about as she wanted them, and as Harold had explained to her the report which Travers had given of his interest in the matter that it did not seem at all strange to her that he had arranged the programme to suit her convenience. She embarked on the voyage without much misgiving.

It seemed to her a matter of course that Linda Lyle should stay by her, and that Primrose should be riding along; while the presence of Travers was hardly noticed, since, after a word or two of explanation, he fell silently back alongside of the only other man he had brought into the party.

It was Bedrock who was the leader of the little procession, and by his side rode Mowrey, who had little to say.

The departure seemed to have been so quietly arranged and made that Paradise knew nothing of it. If there were one or two early birds who heard the cavalcade go by, or even caught a glimpse of it, there was no great interest about it in the camp. Marion had come unheralded, and she went away unnoticed.

The little conversation at first was all in an undertone; and as the party was sorted by twos it did not become general. It was only after daylight had fairly come, and Paradise Point had been left a long way behind, that Marion turned somewhat in her saddle, and, casting a scrutinizing glance at Travers, made a gesture which caused him to come up by her side. With a distant nod she spoke:

"You heard both the stories told in the town yesterday?"

"Certainly."

"And what do you think of them?"

"They may both be true, and yet Hugh Brander may not be dead."

"But do you believe them as far as they go?"

"I never positively believe anything until I know it is true; and I never throw away a pointer unless I happen to have a better one in hand. We will know more about it when we get to Lone Spring Jed's."

"And you think it better to go there instead of attempting to follow back the trail made by that man Jukes?"

"Decidedly."

"Why? To me it seemed otherwise. If there is any hope of finding Brander it would be, I should think, by tracing back the man who left him."

"I have more faith in the burro. If that came in it would be easier to identify its story than to get proof of the one told by Jukes. Excuse me, madam, but from what I know, or rather, from what I have heard of Brander, I am inclined to think Jacob lied."

"Your reasons? Quick! Tell me your reasons."

"Because the man we are after was not that kind of a man at all, and where Jake Jukes could pull through it was not very likely he would kick the bucket. He may be dead, sure enough, but he never

laid down as Jake says he did, unless there was something more in it than Jake has told."

"And you believe the other man's story was nigher truth?"

"It's easier to find out about it."

"When do you think we will get to this Lone Spring?"

"To-day, some time, unless we have bad luck beyond anything I can think of. If we find Jed at home we will be apt to know how it is before night comes on, and to-morrow morning we will be going on farther."

"Farther into the desert?"

"Yes. At least I shall never stop until I find traces of the man I am after; and then I will follow till I get to the other end. Start Charley Travers on a clew and he knows all that it is worth before he gets done with it."

"That is your business, is it?"

"It is supposed to be, and if I am not a past master in the art I want to know."

The speaker gave a shrug of the shoulders that seemed to say he thought the truth was only half told; and then, in answer to the questions of Marion, told his story on much the same lines used in talking to Mowrey about it.

He had been sent to find Brander in order to prove an allegation against a man who was high up in the financial world, and who, in the old times, had never been suspected. When it was once discovered that there was proof Brander could not have been guilty, the natural corollary followed that the other man was.

And the men behind Travers were interested in hunting him down.

"I knew it must be so, when once I had time to think it over," said Marion, coldly.

"And yet, we have each wronged the other. I will speak more of this again."

She drew up alongside of Linda once more, and rode on in silence. She and Linda were both finished equestrians, and the motion of their mounts did not interfere at all with their thoughts. At an easy canter they rode along for miles, until, at last, the lay of the land began to change, for they had branched off from the trail and Bedrock was following a line marked out entirely by his own judgment.

Travers noticed the bearing off, but for a time made no remark.

Now and then he had ridden up to the side of Mowrey for a few words, but for the most part had maintained the position assumed at the start.

After a while he drifted forward again.

"Say, old man, there can be but one gulde; but if you'll allow an outsider to suggest, this is not exactly the way to reach Lone Spring Jed's ranch on a straight line."

"Perobably not, but makin' all allowance fur ther curve-er-toor ov ther airth I reckon it'll be altergether healthier ter make a straight sorter surkel, an' see how ther land lays. Et won't take much ov a slant, an' we'll hit all ther better campin' place fur a noonin'."

"Have it your own way, old man, have it your own way. I notice that when you turned off you didn't leave much of a trail behind you. If we get lost between here and the Lone Spring, lost we'll stay. A 'Pache buck couldn't lift the trail."

"They don't, jinerally can't, fur ez Bedrock are consarned," was the answer.

"Jest wait tell this thing are dun' an' over an' you'll see ther ole man knows how ter run ther ranch."

"You run it, but don't forget that I have an interest in the outfit. If anything happens there may be a mighty big bill to settle with some one." Travers dropped back, and an hour slipped along in silence.

Then Bedrock suddenly pulled in his horse.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AD LANE STARTS FOR THE FRONT.

"You 'bserve?" said Primrose, with a wave of his hand.

"Thar' are all outdoors ter look 'round in, an' a man ez hed no head fur figgers'd be off his base in no time. But, right yan-

der war' ther course Brander and Jake Jukes took, ef they took any at all, an' down yander are a puffedly fair trail ter ther Lone Spring. Just off, we'll look fur sign whar' ther roads branch off—et won't be takin' up much time—an' then, hit er miss, we'll slide along down ter Jed's an' see what's ther good word."

The wisdom of the guide was fairly shown in his choice of route.

They had reached the last camping-ground before plunging into the desert itself, and had they continued on the straight trail they would by this time have been drifting through the desolate regions where trails were scarce, and danger had already begun.

"Guess you are right, old man," said Travers, glancing keenly about him.

"You chose the longest way around, but I wouldn't wonder if it was the shortest way there, to say nothing of what we may pick up on the road. Reckon there's a spring down there."

He pointed toward the green spot he had in view, and Bedrock nodded.

"Thar's a spring thar', but ef et's all ther same to you, s'posin' yer goes a leetle slow. Ef you all kin drap outen sight a while I kin read sign thar' a heap better, an' we kin see ef thar's any other gerloots a goin' ter kim' travelin' long this hyer trail. I'm kinder lookin' fur 'em, an' et mout be ez well ef they didn't see us."

It was not a bad sort of place he pointed to for their noon halt, and the arrangements as proposed by him were soon effected.

"A leetle rough on ther brutes," he said, as the horses seemed to decidedly object; "but thar's another spring a leetle furdur on, an' they kin wait. Don't want ther tracks showin' round hyer."

He went down to the spring with a careful step which never left a mark.

Travers looked inquiringly at him, and would have liked to go along, but was waved back. He stood idly watching until Bedrock returned.

"Jake may hev' told ther truth," was the salutation.

"Some'un' went through hyer not so blamed long ago, an' left ther' marks; but ef et war' him, er them, er not him, er not them, bercussed ef I kin say. I'd ax yer all down ter hev' a look at it, but fact are, I'd jest perfer not leavin' no tracks round thar'. Trust ole Bedrock, an' when ther rest are over we'll go long ter Jed's. That's whar' we git ther p'int, dead open an' shut."

"B—b—but why d—d—don't you want our tracks there?" asked Harold, in some disgust at the airs their guide was putting on.

"Frien's comin', an' I'd jest ez soon they went 'long 'thout knowin' fur sure how we're workin' ther case. 'Tain't time fur killin' ter begin, but ef we struck 'em, er they us, somethin' ov the kind'd hev'ter be did. Ef you hed ez good a ear ez ye'r unkel you'd hear 'em now."

He held up his hand, and the little party listened.

Sure enough, they heard faintly, but beyond a doubt, the clatter of horses' hoofs, and it seemed as though there must be quite a number in the party which was approaching.

Travers looked around.

"You are right, old man. It's our scheme to lay low, and we couldn't have struck a better place for doing that same. It's not always friends one meets at a water hole on the edge of the desert. But we must see what sort of an outfit it is."

"Correct you be, an' ef marm hyer'll jest excuse us a few minnits we kin give her a heap of informashun."

Had the party approaching been on the lookout they might have thought it worth while to search the ground immediately in the neighborhood of their camping-place.

Had they done so they would have made a find that was unexpected and discomfiting.

Instead, they rode right down to the spring, and for a moment one of them searched the ground around it narrowly.

The party in hiding ran but little risk in peering down and obtaining now and then a glimpse of the newcomers.

"There is Uncle Jack," whispered Linda, pointing to a well-dressed man who stood a little aside while the examination was being made.

"An' et's ten ter one, an' no takers, thet Paradise P'int dunno him by any other name than Ad Lane."

"And if it's not an open secret, might I ask who is Uncle Jack?" interposed Travers, looking from the man in the distance to Linda, and then back again.

There was something in all this which he did not understand.

"Jack Lyle he is, so far as I know, and an unworthy uncle of mine. He is the old friend of Brander's who has an insurance on his life that would net him a fortune could he prove him dead. I shiver to think what would happen were he to meet the poor fellow in the desert with a spark of life in him. We must follow them. They are not on this trail to save him."

"And that is J—j—jukes. He d—d—don't seem to hit it s—s—so lively as he b—b—boasted."

Sure enough, the guide to the expedition seemed to be the man who had told the story at the Four X, and he was evidently searching for traces of some kind.

With the spring as a starting-point, he circled around, narrowly inspecting the ground, and now and then shaking his head. He appeared to be disappointed. From the appearance of the men waiting it seemed as though they only intended to make a short halt.

"Ef they go on inter the desert, let 'em go! Et's even up they never kim' back," muttered Bedrock.

"Ef they turn in on the trail fur Jed's, reckon we'll hev'ter git up an' prance, er we won't git a smell at that burro an' his backload ov outfit. They'll be sharp enough ter gobble 'em, w'chever way they find ther cat hez hopped."

"Better settle it here and now," snarled Travers, in a hard, but compressed tone.

He had been unslinging his Winchester, and having tried the breech to see that a cartridge was in place, he crouched there with the gun at a ready, waiting until Jake Jukes should move aside. It was a long shot, to be sure, but not too long for an expert, and from what Harold had seen of him, the Flying Dude felt little doubt that an expert he was.

The hand of Mowrey shot out and rested on the muzzle of the rifle, to gently force it upward.

"Weally," he murmured.

"He may b—b—be a b—b—bad man in that line, b—b—but we ain't in it."

"We ain't shore w'ot they're goin' ter do," added Bedrock.

"I'm kinder on ther shoot meself; but I allers wait tell I hev' a shore thing afore a corryner's jury—an' jest now we ain't. Not ter say I ain't b'in hung three er four times meself, but them war' mistakes."

"And don't forget that, bad though he may be, he is still my uncle, who at one time of my life cared for me very well, according to his lights."

"An' ther 'mount ov pay he could gobble frum ther estate," chuckled Primrose, who appeared to be delighted with the serene way in which Linda had drawn a revolver and turned upon the supposed detective.

"Oh, well, suppose you are all right. I can wait; but if Mr. Lyle, as you call him, don't walk a chalk line through this same desert, he'll be apt to hear sounds from home before I get done with him. If you good people don't object, I'd like to hear what they think about it, anyhow."

He looked at Bedrock as he spoke, and the old fellow nodded.

"Jest w'ot I war' thinkin' ov meself, an' ef you kin turn ther trick, slide out. But ef they ketch yer at it, don't bring us inter yer diffikilty."

"Scarcely," answered Travers, as he glided away.

He was gone some time, and yet there was no movement to show he had been discovered, while he had vanished so completely from their sight that it seemed he could not be there.

For an hour they waited, until the little party, with Ad Lane and Jukes in the lead, rode out into the desert.

Then they all went down to the spring, where Travers was taking a long draught, leaving the cup-like depression in which they had been hiding with the sense of relief a prisoner must have when he comes out of a jail.

"If that villain can be believed, Brander must be dead; and yet, I doubt him. So does Lane. Curse them, they are both false. Yet, behind it all, there must be some truth, and if Hicks was to be believed we will get an inkling of it at Lone Spring Jed's."

"Pervided them gerloots ain't b'in thar' ahead of us, an' put in a day er so afore they spread ther story in town."

"So much the worse for them. You see," and he gave a short, hard laugh, "when I get to hunting a man down I always imagine I am his dearest friend, and I begin to feel that way about this Brander. If I find he has met with foul play I'll make it even or run them into the Gulf of Mexico."

"But what foul play do you expect?" asked Marlon, chiefly to hear an echo of her own fears.

"If there was a fortune for Ad Lane—or Lyle, as you call him—depending on the death of Hugh Brander, you can swear to it that if it was in the wood Lane would provide the corpse."

Some other conversation, not of the most cheerful kind, was held before they mounted for the afternoon's ride, and when they started again they were headed straight for Jed's, at the Lone Spring.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AT LONE SPRING JED'S.

In the ride that afternoon Marlon got a taste of what being in the desert meant.

True, they had hardly pierced beyond the fringe, so to speak, but the barrenness around was appalling, and the heat of the burning, bare ground almost deadly. As they ground along, so far as she was concerned, in silence, there was full chance to consider over the position, and imagine the ending of Hugh Brander among the waterless fastnesses further on.

Time slipped by, however, and they came wearily cantering up to the little spot where vegetation flourished and Lone Spring Jed had planted his cabin.

It was a true oasis, small though it was, and Jed held it at the muzzle of his rifle.

He was there, and had evidently noted their coming from a distance.

He stood in his doorway with a Winchester in his hand, and around his waist a belt which supported a brace of revolvers and a knife.

His face was not a bad one, as faces go on the border, but he looked as though he was not afraid to depend on his weapons, and made no mistake in doing so.

"Halt, thar'!" he exclaimed, as they came within fair gunshot distance.

"This are my ranch, an' I ain't jest sure I'm willin' fur visitors. Who are ye?"

He threw up his rifle in a careless way, and trained it upon the squad.

He did not act as though he expected a war, but wanted to show he was ready for it if it came.

"Take et easy, ole man, we're hyer on a peaceable errand, an' when we go 'way ag'in we don't count on leavin' ye ez poor ez when we kim'. Yer don't mean ter say yer don't 'cognize Onkel Bedrock, w'ot wunst war a side pard ov' yours?"

"Primrose ye be, fur a dollar; but I don't ketch on ter that gang behind yer. Let 'em sot thar' an' kim' over an' chin a bit. I hev' ter be blamed keeful 'bout ther angels I take in. Grub's down ter low water, an' I war' goin' ter strike out ter-morrer ter lay in commissary."

"If that's all, you needn't jibe. We got a packload ov hard tack, an' sev'ral barrels ov bacon. Stay hyer, all, tell I fix it with ther old man. He's afeared ef he let's yer in he can't get yer out tell ther meal barr'l's empty, an' thar' would be time yit fur ye ter take ther back track ef he stood yer off."

Primrose had hit the true inwardness of Lone Spring Jed's hesitation. At that moment his supplies were limited, and a party like this would soon clean him out if they once got within the cabin.

He recognized Bedrock, however, and looked at him curiously, but without advancing from the doorway, though he held out his hand.

"It's you, pard, sure ernough, an' I wouldn't shake yer, not fur rocks. But, livin', right hyer, are blame s'kass, an' that's a blamed queer lookin' outfit ter be strollin' down this hyer ways. I ain't a feedin' them, nohow."

"Dry up on that. We kin feed yer fur a week ef we wanted ter stay, but to-morrer'll find us a 'hoopin' et up whar' grub's a blamed sight skasser. They wants ter hev' a talk with yer 'bout some ov ther driftwood ez hez b'in comin' this way."

Jed dropped the muzzle of his rifle, which even yet had been slanting toward the party.

"Let 'em come, but I don't want 'em sloppin' over. I got out hyer ter be rid ov ther briny, an' I'd give a fortun' ef I could make sure never ter see a female woman ag'in. Jest give 'em a hint, will yer, thet ther more slop thar' be ther less they'll git outen Lone Spring Jed."

"That's all right, Jed. These ain't ther sloppin' kind. They're lookin' far ther trail ov one Hugh Brander, an' they heared you know'd s'uthin' on ther subjeck. They'll camp hyer ter-night, ter take it in, an' to-morrer we'll cut loose."

He pointed out at the desert, and then beckoned to his party.

Jed did not seem to be altogether satisfied about his coming visitors, though they were under the guidance of one who was, or rather had been, by no means a stranger.

He eyed them sharply, and looked as though, on the least provocation, he would be happy to raise his Winchester and cut loose among them.

His gaze lingered longest upon the supposed detective, though he made no remarks until Primrose brought up Marion for introduction.

"Beggin' ye'r pardon all 'round fur introodin'," said Bedrock.

"May ez well kin right down ter bizziness. This are Missus Mowrey, an' she are a huntin' fur traces ov a man by ther name ov Brander, fur which she hez some interest. We heared you could give us a starter, an' that's what brung us this hyer way. Ef it's a troo bill we won't be lingerin' long. Out with it. W'ot's ther good word?"

"Sister ov hissen?"

"Formerally his wife."

"Formerly, eh! S'posin' he ain't crossed over?"

"Formerly, aryhow; but with er kinder sleepin' int'rest."

Marion flushed a trifle, but did not look like one who would indulge in what Jed had called slopping.

"I kin give yer what I got; an' it may not be much, an' it may be a heap, 'cordin' ez it strikes yer. Will yer hev' it now, or not tell later on?"

"Hev' et now, an' git ther thing over with. Then we kin git down ter pure livin', 'thout wonderin' all ther time w'ot's kimmin' next."

So, aided now and then by a question, Lone Spring Jed told his story, the substance of which has already been given.

A burro had come in to the spring during the night, and had been found by him wandering around the next morning.

There was nothing strange about that. He had found them there half a dozen at a time, and nothing had ever been heard afterward of their owners, either.

There was a saddle on this particular burro, and on it was packed some miner's equipage, and a bundle don't up in a poncho. A book in that bundle was the only thing which told to whom it might belong.

It was a little book, bound in blue and gold—a book of poems—and in it was written:

"HUGH BRANDER,
"FROM MARION."

He brought out the book and placed it in the hands of Mrs. Mowrey.

Then, for the first time, she showed some signs of being shaken.

She remembered it only too well. Her hand had written the inscription, and it

surprised her beyond measure to find it here. In her wildest dreams of late she would never have imagined it as being still in his possession.

"It is his name," she said, turning to Bedrock.

"I wrote it there myself."

"Whar's ther burro?" asked Bedrock, turning hastily to Jed.

He had no desire to help Marion continue in the strain she seemed about starting.

"Thar's whar' ye got me. 'Tain't offen anything gits away, but that did, without leave er notiss. Jeset slipped off in ther dark, an' it warn't w'uth ther follerin'. I didn't give much ov a look fur it, but fur ez I kin say, ther blamed fool thing went back."

"Back inter ther desert?"

"That's what I made outen it. An' that's what makes me kinder think mebbe ther man what owned it might be livin'. You kin skulp me fur a Mokee squaw, but I b'lieve ther critter hez gone ter look him up."

"More pluck ner sense; but that's ther way ther thing wuks sometimes. Wonder it didn't ax yer ter go along."

"Mebbe it did; but I ain't ary too well posted on what that sorter fowl means when it cackles."

"And we are more heartless than that poor dumb beast, who only waited for one taste of food and water, and then went back to try to save a human life! Great Heavens! What fools or what cowards we are!"

Marion spoke in heat, and was turning away. If she had been allowed to work her own will she might have started straight forward on an aimless quest for the missing man, and left the others to work their own will.

"Go slow," said Bedrock, soothingly, and with something like pity in his tone.

"We ain't got ter ther bottom ov ther story, by a jugful. An' we can't do nothin' ter-night. Lissen to ther rest ov it, an' then we'll make er map an' figger out ther campaign."

"But every minute may count."

"In course; an' that's ther reason why I don't want ter throw ary minuits away. Ef's jest twelve hours longer without food er water ef we start now; jest twelve hours taken outen ther stock—an' twicte ez much outen us."

Linda had said nothing, but simply kept by her friend. A silent gesture she made now had as much effect as Bedrock's words.

"Thar's one thing I've b'in goin' ter say when I got 'round to it. That book may hev' b'in Hugh Brander's—whoever he war'—an' he may hev' b'in in ther outfit, but I've seed that burro afore, an' he b'longed to a man named Jake Jukes. An' ef he war' off huntin' arybody it's a safe hand ter play thet it war' Jukes he war' after."

"An', dog my cats, ef he didn't find him!" exclaimed Bedrock.

"That's ther very critter he rode inter Paradise yesterday arternoon. I'm gamblin' we kin reach whar' he left Brander—ef he left him at all—afore he does. Git all ther rest yer kin ter-night—to-morrer ther real work begins."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE TRAP IN THE BARRANCA.

The steaming heat went up from the bare plain, and the outfit pushed wearily along with Bedrock in the lead, though Harold Mowrey rode sulkily by his side.

All day long they had toiled over the barren waste without sighting a living thing; but once or twice they had come upon bones. Going or coming they knew not which, but at some time a horse or a mule had lain down exhausted, and never risen again.

As yet they had found no human skeletons, but Bedrock knew they were to come, and he had warned his party of it in advance. In that arid atmosphere it would be no strange thing to stumble across a body that had become completely mummified. It might be they would find the object of their search before the day was over, though of that Primrose only dropped a vague hint.

Even if the story of Jake Jukes was true, they would not reach the neighborhood of the spot where Brander threw himself down for some little time, and it was not worth while to excite Marion before the time came.

Evening was coming on, and the hour when the sun would suddenly drop behind the western horizon and leave darkness behind was near at hand, yet the leader gave no evidence that he was ready for a halt, though from time to time he peered anxiously around.

Considering the circumstances they had made a flying march that day, and if Bedrock had made no mistakes they would in an hour reach the spot where he intended to camp for the night.

Whatever speed they might desire to make, there was limit to their progress, and even Marion was not sorry the time to dismount was drawing near. She had no thought of giving up the quest, but understood better than she had done its nature.

Something seemed to attract the eye of Travers.

He uttered a low whistle, and at the same time drew in his horse.

At the signal the rest followed suit, and stared in the direction he was staring.

Away off, to the right of their course, there was a little moving spot. All saw it, though it was not so easy to make out what it was. To Marion it seemed possible that it was a prowling wolf, though in that region wolves were scarce indeed.

"It's a two-legged man critter", shore ernough," said Bedrock, with something like a sigh.

"Blame him, w'ot does he mean, turnin' up jest now?"

"A man!" gasped Marion, taking a still closer look, and trying in vain to make out the outlines of a human figure.

"Can it be possible? Perhaps it is Brander himself?"

"S'kassly. W'ot we want ter do are ter find out ef et's a pore cuss thet's lost; er ef he's jest strollin' 'round ter take in ther evenin' air fur ther sake ov his health. / Blamed ef I like his mo-shuns."

There seemed nothing particularly suspicious to the female portion of the party. The black spot simply kept moving on in the direction it had been going. If man it was, what more likely than that he had not seen them at all? He was evidently striking for the low mounds which lay a mile or so farther on.

"Reckon he's seen us; what think yer, pard?"

Primrose turned to Charley Travers, who was watching with a puzzled look.

"Better fire a couple of shots. He's not so far off he won't hear them, and if he don't stop for them we'll know that either he don't want to see us, or else is blind, staring crazy. It is just as like to be that last. A day or so without water around here on top of a bit of hard living, and a man don't know which way he's going, but he thinks it can't be worse."

The idea was not a bad one.

Bedrock acted on it, and fired off the charges in one of his revolvers, timing the discharges so that they followed one after the other with perfect regularity.

If the spot was a man, and if that man was not deaf, the sounds should have reached him, but he gave no sign, though Marion held her breath, and the others watched with great interest.

"He is going on! See, he is going on. We must follow him. His life may depend on our never losing sight of him for a minute; and, oh, think if it should be Brander!"

Bedrock hesitated.

He knew better than the rest where they were, and that it might be staking their own lives to turn to the side, where, in the coming darkness, they might lose their bearings and wander miles off from the right course. He could locate their position now to a mile; but how would it be if he once allowed himself to go at random?

It seemed a dilemma from which there was but one way of exit.

"We can't split, an' ef we wait tell we go inter camp I reckon thar' wouldn't be much chance ov findin' him ag'in. Ef ye'r' willin' ter run ther chances, Bedrock's on board."

"Every chance; that is what we are here for," exclaimed Marion; and without farther delay every face was set in the direction in which the spot was moving, and the chase began.

It looked as though they should be able to overtake the party before he could reach the ground for which he seemed to be aiming. Certainly they could cover two yards to his one, but a stern chase is a long one, and sunset was not so far off.

They seemed to be gaining for a while, and the spot actually resolved itself into a man, on foot, who was striding along without ever looking backward. Once more Bedrock discharged several shots, but still he neither halted nor looked around; and then, suddenly, seemed to sink into the ground and they saw him no more.

They marked the spot well where he disappeared.

Though there was little to distinguish it from the rest of the plain, Bedrock took the direction from the higher ground beyond and rode as straight as an arrow.

Nevertheless, they found no trace of him, though Primrose pointed out the method of his disappearance. There was a depression in the ground, which ran along as far as they could see, deepening rapidly into something like an arroyo.

Travers looked along the line of retreat and shook his head.

"It's elegant fun to hunt the tiger, but not so interesting when the tiger turns the joke and begins to hunt you. It is just as well to understand the chances before we go down there."

"He cannot have gone far, and the way is as smooth as a road. There is no time to lose. He cannot be five minutes ahead of us. Hasten!"

The enthusiasm of Marion was up to fever heat, and she would not have stopped now if she had been sure there were several tigers. Striking her horse sharply, she urged Bedrock on and the rest followed, with one exception. A word from Travers to Hank Edwards, the man who had been brought into the party by him, caused him to remain behind; though whether it was as a guard or a scout, would have been hard to say.

Down into the barranca the rest plunged, with Bedrock in the lead, and though the minutes slipped away one after another, no sign of the fugitive could be seen, nor did they meet with any place where it seemed likely he could have scrambled out of the crevice in the plain.

And then, suddenly and almost without warning, the night came down upon them.

"J—j—just as I thought, weally."

Harold had kept his peace during the conference and the chase.

In fact, he had been keeping his peace most of the time since leaving Paradise. He was not exactly charmed at the idea of taking this wild goose trip anyhow, and if he had thought there was any use in so doing, would have fought hard enough against Marion attempting it. It was bad enough for the male members of the outfit, without involving two women in the desert dangers.

But Marion had brought him to Paradise as an escort, and he was too gallant to think of staying back when she said go farther.

And then, there was Linda Lyle.

He had not seen very much of the young lady, but what he had seen and heard had made a deep impression, and if he could have analyzed his thoughts he would have been apt to discover that her face was drawing quite as much as Marion's commands were driving him.

His exclamation was made to her, for, having first dropped into single file when they came down into the gorge, as the darkness thickened he had drawn his

horse back a trifle and ranged by the side of Linda.

"Really, what?"

There was a trifle of anxiety in her tone, and unconsciously she touched her bridle rein slightly, so as to draw a little closer. Harold might be eccentric in his manner, but she had seen enough of him to believe he was a man upon whom she might depend were her life at stake.

"B—b—beg p—p—pardon; it's not complimentary, b—b—but I knew Marion would m—m—make a mix."

"I am sure I do not see how we could have done any better."

"If B—b—bedrock is guide, B—b—bedrock should have run the outfit. We c—c—can't f—f—find that spook, and now I'm n—n—not so sure we c—c—can f—f—find ourselves."

"Don't be despondent. Things can't be much worse than the best out here. Things are much of a sameness. If we are not dead already I suppose it's a sign everything will progress on the same lines, and we will get back by the cuticle of our masticators. But if we do get back I'll consider I have done enough for duty, and confine myself for the future to keeping out of the hands of Uncle Jack."

"In which, aw, I shall be g—g—glad to assist you."

Mowrey would have been rejoiced if he could have seen the glance the young lady turned upon him; but darkness veiled her blushes, and all he knew was that there a curious little tremor in her voice as she simply answered:

"Thanks."

They had been following Bedrock by faith rather than by sight, and he had been slowly threading the deile without any fair notion of what was before him. He trusted almost entirely to the instinct of his horse, and so far it had not betrayed him. When it stopped suddenly Primrose gave a low order and the others halted likewise, and this brought the brief conversation between Harold and Miss Linda to an end.

Why the horse had stopped was a puzzle to Bedrock, and he wanted it solved. He did not believe there was a pitfall or a chasm in the way, and as his eyes had become somewhat accustomed to the gloom, the road seemed open in front of them. If he had not believed in animal instinct he would have urged the beast forward.

Instead, he dismounted, and, standing carefully by the side of the animal, lit the lantern which they had provided for such emergencies.

The first thing he saw as he held the light above his shoulder and gave a sweeping glance forward, was a rope stretched across from one side to the other of the barranca. It might have been put there for an unwary intruder to stumble over, but to him it looked like the trigger of a trap.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TRAVERS TAKES THE CHUTE.

"That settles it!" said Bedrock, in a low tone.

"We du'nno' w'o they are, an' they don't mean that we shell. Ther sooner we back outen hyer ther better. Ef we try ter go funder thar'll be musie in ther air, an' ther sounds won't be ary too sweet, either."

"Right you are," put in Travers, who, having dismounted, was at his shoulder, and had also been examining closely the look of things beyond.

"If it was the man we are after he wouldn't be so apt to care whether he was found or not that he would set a deadfall like that, to take in the whole party. If we had the time and rope and tree were convenient. I wouldn't mind helping the fellow who did this to a merited elevation; but as it is, I guess we want to take the back track—till daylight comes, anyhow."

"Yes, till daylight comes," said Marion, with a tinge of obstinacy in her tone.

"You seem to think there are bad, desperate men to be met with here. If that be

so what is to prevent their having found Brander? By daylight we can at least hold a conference with them, and see what they know. If they are once assured we mean them no harm they will not be so utterly brutal as to refuse to tell us what they know. Then we can go on our way, if needs be; but until we know he has not been here we cannot give it up."

"Tain't a questshun ov givin' him up, ez I see it; but it's ourselves what's on order considerashun. We kin stand it twenty-four hour yit an' still git back ter Jed's; but don't yer furgit et, that ef this are ther sort I reckon on they may be jest ez anxious that we shan't git thar' ez we be ter do et, an' ef they caught Brander nosin' 'round they'd be more apt ter give him lead than grub."

"There's one little thing you have forgotten. If there is such a gang here—and from what I have heard and seen, I wouldn't wonder if there was—they can't live on air. It's a sure thing there's water down here somewhere, and I wouldn't wonder if the cattle were smelling it now. Hold hard, all of you, or there may be a stampede."

There was more danger of the thing which Travers suggested than Marion had yet noticed, though she knew the animal on which she rode had become strangely restless, and that she had been instinctively tugging at the reins.

Travers had not spoken in a tone which would of itself excite alarm, but there was no need to do that. In the darkness and silence of the arroyo a thought itself seemed almost sufficient to awaken a feeling akin to fear.

There was no opposition when Bedrock proposed they retrace their steps until they should come to a place where the opportunity for defense would be better, and they could wait for daylight to decide what was to be done.

Of course it had all been guesswork as to what they might meet should they go farther on, but they went back like an army on the retreat through an enemy's country, and finally emerged in good order upon the plain above.

An exclamation from Travers caused them to start and look around, but it was only when he spoke that they understood the man he had left behind was missing.

Had he taken his departure of his own accord, or had something happened to him? The questions were important, but they were by no means easy of solution. Though Bedrock examined the ground in the immediate neighborhood by the light of his lantern, and ran, as they began to believe, considerable risk in so doing, he could tell nothing more when the inspection was finished.

The man was gone, and that was all they could tell about it.

"W—w—what now?"

Mowrey looked up at Bedrock as well as he could in the darkness, but could catch nothing of the puzzled expression which was really on the face of their guide.

"You kin toss up ter see, fur blamed ef I want ter edvize yer. It's a good ten mile ter whar' I meant ter pitch ther layout fur ther night. Ef we're goin' ter 'xplore hyer thar's no use ter think ov makin' ther journey thar' an' back. Thar' might be wuse places ter camp than right hyer, and I guess we'll turn in, an' ef ther pirates ov ther barranca turn up we'll jest give 'em ther best we hev' in ther shop, an' let et go at that."

The proposition was about the only one to offer under the circumstances. They were in no condition to make an extra twenty mile trip, nor was it likely they would be altogether driven out of the neighborhood by the shadow of a danger which they did not at all understand.

By moving some little distance along the edge of the barranca, they could come to a spot where at least they could not be attacked from front and rear at the same time.

Without delay they prepared to spend a night which they knew would be terribly uncomfortable, and believed would be more or less full of danger.

They found the spot for the camp without having to go far.

There were no comforts about it, and under other circumstances they would have thought it about the most uncomfortable spot they could have selected.

It had its element of danger, too; for though with average watchfulness on their part it would be almost impossible to take them by surprise, yet it would be about as unpleasant a spot to be besieged in as they could well find. The steep, precipitous bank in their rear precluded retreat in that direction, while there were little swells in the ground in front which would allow besiegers to find refuge here and there as they approached.

When they were fairly located, Travers glided away, after a brief consultation with Bedrock. He wanted to make a search once more for the missing man, whose name was Hark Edwards, and who scarcely looked like one who would have played them false, or yet have allowed himself to be captured without a single shot for warning.

Travers glided along silently as a ghost, and keeping every sense on the alert.

The disappearance of Edwards had been a genuine surprise, and troubled him more than a little. He still had hopes that he might have returned, but when the place where he should have been was reached, there was no sign of him; and there was no answer to a low, thrilling whistle which should have reached him had he been near.

Once more Travers went down the sloping hollow which led into the deepening barranca. He had carefully noted the distances, and though running grave risks, he went along rapidly, trusting to be able to stop before reaching the spot where the rope stretched across his course.

Was it chance which aided him, or was it the subtle instinct which sometimes comes to a person in danger? He halted, and, bending low, lit a match.

Right in front of him was the rope.

Urged on by powerful curiosity he ran all risks, and carefully stepping over the cord, continued his course down the bed of the canyon, guided for a few yards by the feeble light of other matches which he struck from time to time.

After a while he heard the low murmur of voices, and crept on more quietly than ever. He might not find Edwards, but he was in a fair way of coming on the men who hid behind the trap.

Redoubling his caution he made a slight turn around the rocky wall, guiding his steps, and saw a faint glimmer of light not far away.

There was a niche in the rock, and the murmur came from there. Three or four men were crouched around the little remnants of a fire which seemed to be carefully husbanded.

At that distance, and in such an uncertain light, it was almost impossible to make anything out of features or forms, yet Travers fancied the men were desperadoes of the true desert type; and now and then he caught something like a shimmer of light on steel. He dropped upon his hands and knees, and moved forward more cautiously than ever, yet he made a mistake for all that.

His attention was turned to the men above rather than to the rock below, and suddenly there came a catastrophe.

Without warning his hands dropped on nothingness, he pitched forward with a half-uttered cry, and then went sliding down a steep incline of rock so smooth he found it impossible to check himself, and below it seemed to him that he heard the gurgle of water.

There was a moment later a sullen splash, and then a challenge from above. The lurkers leaped to their feet, and one of them caught up a brand from the fire, and waving it over his head until it flamed up, held it over the sheer edge of the rocky wall and peered downwards.

He caught just a glimpse of a white face turned upwards, and then Charley Travers was swept away.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BEDROCK TO THE RESCUE.

Until they had a chance to rest, Marion and her friend had not known how worn they had been by the fatigues of the past two days.

Surrounded as they were by darkness and uncertainty, there seemed little doubt but that they would be wakeful and watchful, yet, the fact was that when a little resting place had been made on the ground, and, at Bedrock's suggestion, they had thrown themselves down, their eyes closed of their own accord, and before they knew that sleep was approaching they were overpowered.

Primrose had known it would be so, and had laid his plans accordingly.

Not more than five minutes had elapsed since Travers had glided away, and he and Mowrey were crouching just where the low murmur of their conversation could not have reached the ears of the ladies, had the latter been listening.

"Their little army are kinder rejooiced," whispered Bedrock, as he gave a squint along the edge of the barranca, in the direction taken by Travers.

"It's rough lines on a tenderhuff like you, but you b'ln a sproutin', an' I ain't ashamed ter say ye'r a blamed sight better man ner yer look."

"Weally?"

"True bill. Mebbe yer kin suspect thet this outfit—outside er ther fack thet Bedrock's a runnin' it—are in a heap ov danger. Even ye'r onkel ain't quite sure how ther game are runnin', an' he's got ter find out er ther may be a las' sickness fur ther wrong man."

"B-b—but how'll you f-f-find out? Isn't that what we're waiting for?"

"We're waitin' 'case we can't go ary furdur. I didn't wanter let on afore ther leddies, but I got ter know what's bercome ov Travers, an' I got ter know what's bercome ov that lunkhead, Hark Edwards. An' ter do et I gotter leave you hyer ter run ther ranch an' keep ther doors shet ef ther wolves kin, w'ich most likely they will. Are you willin' fur ther job?"

"That's what I am here for."

For once Harold was able to speak without hesitation or a sputter.

"I ain't givin' you but one piece ov advice, an' that are, ter trust nobody—not ef et's Travers hisself, pervidin' he gits hyer afore I kin' back. Hold 'em all up tell yer hears my warble ag'in, an' ef they must kin' inter camp, bev' yer derringers handy in y'er side pockets, an' shoot ter kill ef ther dam b'usts. Ef I don't git back by mornin' don't lose no time, but hike it ter Jed's, which are on a straight line with ther big peak 'way ter the no'theast ov him. So long."

He held out his hand, which was grasped by the young man for an instant, and then the two separated, Bedrock slipping silently along the course lately taken by the missing Travers.

He had said just enough to put the young man thoroughly on his guard against everybody and everything, and he shrugged his shoulders as he thought if the warning was not heeded it would not be his fault.

Though by no means a small man, Primrose moved with a swiftness and a silence that was remarkable.

He had allowed Travers sufficient time to be thrown off his guard if he looked for pursuit, and counted now on overhauling him rapidly. He had little doubt about the course taken, and only once did he halt, and then only for a moment at the spot where he had looked for traces of the missing Edwards.

He listened there, confident that any murmur of voice would carry a long way on the still night air.

All was silence, however, and he turned down into the barranca, slipping along with the greatest confidence, even after he had plunged into the darkness, which thickened as the chasm grew deeper.

The result was that he was soon almost in pistol-shot range, and saw Travers light the matches which guided him over the rope.

He knew that it would be dangerous for him to adopt the same method to escape

the overhanging danger, for there was no telling how soon the man in front would give a backward glance, and it was not in Bedrock's scheme for him to know that he was followed.

"Hev' ter watch clost, figger et fine, an' then take ther chances," was the muttered comment of Primrose, as, by the flicker of the last expiring match, he indistinctly saw the dark thread which seemed to be within reaching distance as stooped low.

He edged forward a few inches, and then lifted his foot high enough, in the parlance of the times, to step over a yaller dog. Slowly and with infinite care he passed the point of danger, and was again upon the trail with a free foot.

Perhaps it was because he was not following precisely in the footsteps of his predecessor that he caught sight of the little gleam from the smoldering fire almost, if not quite, as soon as did Travers.

"Holed him ther fust break!" chuckled Bedrock.

"Pard's layin' low, eh! Git on to his nibs, Primrose; he's w'ot I thor't—a fraud ov ther fu'st water!"

Nevertheless, he was obliged to reconstruct his opinion slightly, for, listening sharply, and approaching cautiously, he found that the individual in front of him was doing the same thing, and it was certain that he was anxious to approach without being seen.

Bedrock was keener to watch the men above than to keep track of the one below, and came near to being caught in the same trap which had taken Travers. He heard the cry, and halted just in time.

What it meant he did not know, but he looked upward still, and saw the man spring forward with a flaming torch which cast a bright glow over his features.

"Kenyon Bob!" was the mental exclamation of Primrose, as, on the instant, he recognized the face.

His revolver was already in his hand, and it seemed to be full time to use it. Aided by the light of his torch, Kenyon Bob was aiming downward at something in the bed of the barranca, and Primrose did not wait to see what it might be, since instinct told him it must be Travers. The man above fired once, and then Bedrock took a snap shot at the hand which held the torch.

The aim, such as there was of it, had been rue, for with a howl of surprise and pain, the man dropped the brand, which came whirling down. It lay just at the foot of the wall of rock, and out of sight from above. It burned up with reasonable brightness, however, and showed to Bedrock the sloping rock which led downward.

In the center it was quite smooth, but on either side of the chasm it was sufficiently rough to offer a fair foothold, and Primrose did not hesitate, but sprang forward, and, grasping the torch, continued on, keeping close under the lee of the rock.

The chances were there was a path down, and that the men above might come rushing to meet him, but Bedrock did not intend they should be able to shoot him from above, while he had no time to spare if he wanted to learn what had become of Charley Travers.

He heard the low lap, lap, of water, and saw it shimmering as it gurgled by. It was a sunken river, such as he had already had an experience of at least once in his life, though how large was this stream or how rapid its current he could not at the glance tell. What he did note more particularly was a struggling figure at some little distance, and that he located rather more by sound than by sight.

A slippery point of rock had offered an insecure hold to hang by, or long before this Travers would have been swept away into the darkness beyond. Without a word he hung there, now and then partially climbing out of the water, but as often sliding back.

As Bedrock looked, crouching low on the brink to be out of sight of those above, his grip failed him altogether, and Travers went down after the manner of one who cannot swim.

There was no time to hesitate, and fortunately Bedrock could slide into the water

without a plunge. Holding the lighted torch with one hand, with the other he swam vigorously, even though he felt the rapid current sucking him down.

The light made him the fairer mark for those above, and he knew well enough what sort of treatment he could expect after the rude introduction of himself he had given to the men in the niche. But he knew, too, that the danger in this underground stream was as great as any from them, and that without the light his position, was almost, if not quite, hopeless.

But for the already waning light of the torch he never would have seen the white face that suddenly appeared almost at his elbow, and which he would have altogether passed in the darkness.

He gave a quick grasp, and then, with the torch waving in one hand, and the collar of John Travers' coat gathered in the other, he stood, treading water, and glaring around in search of a way out of the deadly quarters into which he had thrown himself.

Then the ball opened, for from above the bandits of the barranca were beginning to shoot, guided by the torchlight which revealed a dark spot on the surface of the water.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MISSING.

Marion and her friend had yielded to slumber at once, and were sleeping the sleep of those utterly tired out, yet they opened their eyes suddenly upon hearing muffled but suspicious sounds.

"Pistols," whispered Marion, glancing across to Linda.

"But where? Hush!"

She held up her hand and raised her head in an attitude of listening.

The sounds were repeated, and they seemed to come from the ground itself and right beneath them.

Mowrey was also listening, and he silently came nearer. There seemed something ghostly about those sounds, rising in such fashion in the silence of the night. It was no wonder all three were impressed and anxious.

"He's f-f-found something," stammered the Flying Dude.

"Who?" asked Marion, sharply. She had not yet noted the absence of any one.

"B-b-bedrock. He started on the p-p-path, and I reckon he's g-g-got war."

"Good Heavens! Then we are alone?"

She stared at her brother in some dismay.

With the noise of that fusillade in her ears it was no wonder she was startled to think that they were without a guide and without any knowledge of where they were. If Primrose did not return what was to become of them?

"W-w-wish we were," stuttered Mowrey. "W-w-we'd go back sailing. B-but we g-g-got to wait for them."

Harold did not seem much alarmed. He had an idea that Bedrock, and probably Travers, were between them and danger, and he knew what two men could do with their revolvers in holding a pass like the bed of the barranca. It never entered into his mind that conditions might be reversed, and that the outlaws were the nearest.

Marion had a different view of things.

"Never! At all hazards we will keep on the trail until we find what has become of poor Hugh. I deserted him once when he was in danger; now I will do my whole duty when we are both involved."

"Weally."

Harold raised his eyebrows questioningly. This growing interest of his sister in the man whom once she had declared she hated with an eternal hatred, began to amuse him, in spite of the strong probability he believed there was that it would end at a grave.

Linda had been following patiently the lead of her friend, without venturing many suggestions. She recognized the straits of the trio, and was not altogether charmed with any such desperate resolve as that expressed by Mrs. Mowrey.

"Excuse me, Marion, but I begin to

think we have not taken exactly the best way to benefit the dear departed—if departed he is. This man Bedrock no doubt means well enough, and knows more of the desert than we could expect to. We should have followed his advice and desires, and kept on. It is not likely that Brander can be here, and what I fear is that Uncle Jack may find him first, should he still be in the land of the living. After the glimpse you have had of what sort life around here is, you cannot doubt what that means. He would kill him without mercy."

"You folks had b-b-better be thinking about yourselves, and let p-p-poor Brander b-b-be."

"It is because I am thinking about ourselves that I am troubled about him," answered Marion, almost wringing her hands.

"If anything happens to us, what will become of him?"

"If he is n-n-not dead I'll be bound he k-k-can take care of himself, and if he is dead there is no hurry about the f-f-funeral. Weally, I b-b-believe some one is coming."

He turned toward the plain, and stared away into the darkness, where all of them now thought they could hear the regular beating of horses' hoofs.

What might be coming they could not even guess, but Harold knew it would be well to look after their own animals, if it was only to avoid the possible danger of a stampede.

With a word of caution to enjoin silence he crept away, and was swallowed up in the night.

It seemed to him that a single rider was aiming straight for the spot where they had entered the crevice in the plain, and as the rider came nearer, he was certain he had no companions near.

That gave him courage, if, indeed, he could have been said to lack it.

Though it was not likely he could obtain anything like a clear view of the man, yet natural curiosity drew him on, and he crept farther and farther away from the two ladies.

Nevertheless, the horseman would have passed him at some little distance had it depended on Mowrey himself, who crouched down with the thought that he was surely invisible.

The man had eyes for everything, and perhaps it was that sudden motion which called attention to the prowler.

Swerving almost as if on a pivot, the horse suddenly darted toward Harold, while a sharp voice rang out on the night air:

"Hands up! there, and no tricks, or you bite lead!"

"S-s-steady, yourself, or there m-m-may be lead on b-b-both sides."

Mowrey was as apt with his revolver as the horseman had been, and the two sharp clicks rose on the evening air almost as one. Had there not been a lingering notion on the part of Mowrey that he recognized the voice there might have been some shooting, with the advantage not altogether on the side of the newcomer.

But the latter was quicker to recognize, and he was certain that he made no mistake. In all that section there could not be another man with that splutter and drawl.

"Hello, there! If that's not Mowrey I'm away off. I surrender—take me into camp."

"St-st-stemwinder Saul, b-b-by all that's holy! I'm as glad to see you as flowers in spring."

There could be no doubt about who this was, and Harold did not exaggerate his pleasure at the meeting.

The two shook hands cordially, and then Saul asked:

"What are you doing here, of all places? I didn't expect to find you within a dozen miles; and, if I am not mistaken, this is not the safest place in the world for you, either."

"I'm holding the fort, b-b-but I'd a heap sight sooner a goodsized fort was holding m-m-me. There's danger in the air. D-d-did you hear the music?"

"Yes; that was what brought me in this

direction. The ladies? Where are they? you should not have left them for a moment."

"We'll f-find them in a minute. They're just over yonder. This way."

Saul had dismounted and had thrown his bridle over his arm. Together they walked toward the spot where the ladies had been left, Mowrey explaining the situation as they went along. For all his careless front he realized well enough that the situation was one of danger, and was not ashamed to let it be known.

At the same time he did not think it best to repeat the suspicions of Bedrock in regard to Travers. There was most likely some mistake about that.

Harold had supposed he could return without hesitation to the little camp, but he found the darkness puzzled him. He wandered from one point to another. Five minutes at least were lost moving along the edge of the barranca.

Then, at last, he found the place—but he found it tenantless. There was a little scattered dunnage to mark the site of the camp, but Marion and Linda were both gone.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE STRUGGLE WITH THE STREAM.

Bedrock was aware he had started the fight himself, and that the men who were shooting away at him with such hearty good-will had reason enough for their actions.

That they would keep it up as long as his head remained above water and they had a chance to draw something like a bead on him, he was ready to believe. It behooved him to get out of range as soon as possible, and yet he had to act with coolness, too.

He knew if he plunged forward with the course of the stream a very few seconds would take him out of the range of their bullets, and then it was possible he would find himself in a worse danger.

To venture on a headlong flight by way of an unexplored and altogether unknown underground river was as much a courting of death as to remain where he was and accept the chances. He held the torch as high as he could above his head, and gazed up at the farther bank.

The bank was steep, yet it seemed to him there was a chance at a spot a little farther on to obtain a foothold if he could only reach it. Still maintaining his grasp on the torch and Travers, he threw himself forward in that direction, until, finding he could not manage both, with a desperate effort he cast the brand upward and into the darkness.

It lay where it fell, its blaze dying down into a glow, and he was at least no longer visible to the men who were peering downward into the stream, trying in vain to locate him.

Then his fingers grazed along the smooth and slippery rock until they found a crevice.

He was not altogether certain he was invisible. Though the firing had almost ceased, there came one shot which flattened on the stone right at his hand. It might be only guesswork, but it was far too close to be comfortable. The sooner he moved his position the better, if the last marksman was going to keep this range.

There was one thing which, in a certain respect, gave him satisfaction. Travers had made no frantic efforts, such as might be expected from one who was in danger of drowning. He was very much alive, but from the moment Bedrock's sustaining hand was felt all exertion ceased.

It was time now for individual action.

"Ef you got ther strength, pard, yer better try an' ketch on. Et ain't ther safest thing ter trust ontirely to yer onkel in climbin' these hyer rocks. He might let yer drap, and then you'd hear that drap most mighty loud. Roust up on my shoulders an' see ef you can't reach ther dock."

"All right. Hold steady. No need to quarrel over who goes first. Somebody has got to get there. Let go of me; I'm coming."

For the first time he caught at Bedrock, and as the hand of the latter loosened its

grip he scrambled actively upon his shoulders, moving with swiftness, and yet with care. He did not know how precarious the hold of Primrose might be, but his motions were so deftly made that they could hardly break it.

The most finished acrobat could not have done the work more nimbly, when he had once stretched himself to his full height, his foot left Bedrock's shoulder without the delay of an instant, and then, with a scramble and a swing, he drew himself upward, and lay panting, but safe, on a narrow ledge of rock a few feet from where the torch was smoldering.

"Wait a minute now, and I'll give you a hand up," he whispered. "It's a good long reach, but I think you can make it."

"Jest keep outen the way, pard. You ain't jest up ter my weight, an' thar' ain't no use fer both ter go onder ef one can't make et. Hyer we kim'."

He had found what he judged would be a hold for both hand and foot, and, without waiting for the assistance Travers would have given, made an effort.

There was no light by which he might guide his movements, and the rocks were wet and slimy. Cautiously he drew himself up, and it seemed as though his hands dropped of their own accord upon places that offered a secure hold.

Judging by the sound of Travers' breathing, he was already more than half way up to the ledge when another shot came from the opposite side of the stream, and with a grunt of disgust his hand slipped from the point of rock it was trying to grasp.

He clutched fiercely out, but his fingers only met the smooth wall, and falling outward from the foothold he still retained, he dropped into the water with a splash, and was swept along by the current.

At the same time a flaming torch appeared on the opposite bank where he had taken the water from the barranca, and two men, pistols in hand, stood staring down the stream, ready for a shot at the first glimpse of the fugitives.

Bedrock had turned with the idea of fighting his way back against the current, but the sight of the men staggered him in his purpose.

They meant shoot, and without doubt the chances would be all in their favor after he came within the circle of light thrown by their brand.

Were he coming upon them from above it might have been a more even thing, for his pistols were still unharmed, and he could have drifted down on them like a floating battery, but this way he would have his hands full with the struggle against the stream.

Meantime, it was certain he could not stand still, while, if he allowed himself to be swept away into the caverns of the sunken river, he might as well give himself up as lost altogether.

It seemed likely they had not yet discovered Travers had escaped from the water, and with the hope of at least diverting attention from him, Primrose began a splashing which could not help but reach the listening ears. And the movement took him across the narrow stream.

"Ef he'd on'y open fire onter 'em it'd help amazin', but, blame him, I s'pose he ain't thinkin' ov et, an—"

His thoughts took another turn. Grasping at the bank, he found it receded from him, and cautiously veering to the left he floated under an overhanging roof of rock where the water shoaled, the current formed a weak eddy, and his feet found a solid resting place. He drew himself out of the water, and found himself in a place of at least present safety.

He looked around, but could see nothing. The wall of the indentation even cut off the faint glow of the torch, which had been but lately shining over his shoulder.

"Thar's sich a thing ez hev'in' too much luck," he muttered.

"Thet's what war' ther matter with my pard up thar". Ef he'd jest missed his holt he might hev' b'in 'long with me, and a heap sight better off. I dun'no' ef I better let him run his own streak, or try ter git him inter mine. Better lay low, I reckon, an' wait fur 'em ter settle down. Ef war breaks out ag'in I kin fly ter ther resky."

All was silent, but he did not believe they had given up the watch, so it seemed best to remain under cover for a while, and trust to Travers being able to take care of himself.

That same Travers was in rather a crumpled condition, and if Bedrock could have obtained a fair view of his late companion he would have opened his eyes a little wider than he had yet done in the course of a life which had been reasonably full of surprises.

While Bedrock was drifting away, the pseudo-detective, once satisfied that it was impossible to render him any aid, was primping up his—or her—ruffled plumage, and trying to lay out a plan of procedure which might offer some hope of escape.

It had to be flight or hiding, because the revolvers he lately carried both lay in the bed of the sunken river.

Voices began to be heard from the other side, in low but earnest conversation, and Travers hugged the rock closer as the men with the torch and revolvers appeared at the edge of the barranca.

It was a little puzzling, too.

It argued that the intruders must be safely within a trap, or the whole force would have moved forward. What were the rest doing?

Unfortunately the niche in the rocks where the party had been consulting when first seen by Travers was outside of his line of vision now, and he could not see the movement on foot, or he would have understood.

There was a way upward, in spite of the precipitous appearance of the side of the chasm, and three men were taking it.

They knew well enough that the two were sufficient to hold the shore against any ordinary men, for this was the only spot where it was accessible from the near side, and it was more than mere curiosity which urged them to find out what sort of a party had been left behind on the plain, and what it was doing.

So it happened that they reached the upper ground not far from the spot where Marion and her friend were crouching listening to the horseman's approach, and waiting to hear Harold Mowrey's challenge if he came dangerously near.

Their attention was all directed to the front, and the shadows to the flank crept nearer and nearer. With a sudden bound they sprang forward, two hands were clapped on two mouths, and the double capture was noiseless and complete.

"Notter whimper!" growled a coarse voice. "You ain't sed what yer comes nosin' 'round fur, but we kin guess, an' we kin block your game an' use yer in ourn. Move silent now, er a pair ov knives'll drap, an' you women with 'em. An' you wants ter step slow an' keerful. Et's a heap ways down, an' ef yer wunst stumbles ye'r' goners."

CHAPTER XXX.

UNDER THE RACK.

Marion had read of some of the mysteries of those desert regions of the West which have been little explored save by the outlaws and the red men, and from which few others who chanced upon them ever returned.

She was destined to come face to face with one of those mysteries, and was more surprised than she had dreamed that she would be. Some little time after her capture she was brought, along with Linda Lyle, into a place the like of which she had never seen before, and which she hoped never to see again—a lurking place of the bandits of the barrancas.

It certainly was not the work of their hands, though the outlaws upon whom her eyes fell seemed very much at home.

A rough and desperate looking gang they seemed to be, and men who had passed through almost every grade of life, and come from every nationality. There were Mexicans, half-breed Indians, deserters from the army, rustlers who had been cowboys, and desperadoes, pure and simple, with the man whom Bedrock had recognized as Kenyon Bob, as their leader.

The room in which they had assembled was one which seemed to have been hol-

lowed out of the solid rock, ages before, but around three of its sides the shadows lay heavy, while only at the end where the party were bunched together was there sufficient light to thoroughly distinguish a face or an object.

In that far-away crypt resources had to be husbanded, and it was even doubtful if it could be made a place of permanent retreat.

It took courage of the highest kind for Marion to answer calmly to Kenyon Bob's question of who she was, and what she and her companions were doing here.

"We are looking for one Hugh Brander. We have it on good authority that he was left somewhere on the desert a short time ago by a companion. If he is living we would find him. If he is dead we would recognize and bury his remains."

"That's all right. But what ye'r' doin' hyer? What you huntin' us for?"

"We were not hunting you, nor did we have any idea there were such persons living. In the distance we saw a man, moving along on foot. We could not attract his attention, so we followed. Who could tell that it was not the missing Brander?"

"It wasn't, by a blamed sight. An' I reckon that yarn won't exactly wash. It ain't half as much Brander ye'r' lookin' fur as what Brander left behind—ef Brander ain't in your outfit hisself. He may hev' been left in ther desert, but it's dead open and shut he didn't stay thar'."

"Ah, thanks! Tell us what you know of that, and the proof of it, and you shall be abundantly rewarded. So that we know he is not dead, and in no danger of dying will be enough. To find him will be but a matter of time."

"We'll git ther reward, sure enough; but ef you finds him er not'll depend s'uthin' on us. An' ef you can't tell a better yarn than that it'll be yer speerit that'll keep ther hunt goin'. You'll have no funder use fur slippers unless they're ov ther golden kind."

"What is it that you mean?"

"Thet people ez come out hyer are after s'uthin' better than dead men's bones, an' thet ef you hedn't hed some sort ov a pointer yer wouldn't hev' run ther reesks. Give it to us straight an' we'll turn yer loose ter take ther back track, soon ez we make sure you ain't a lyin'. You got ter talk; but it 'pends on you ef you kin travel when yer gits through."

There was an air of deadly cruelty about the outlaw captain which explained to Marion better than his words the meaning of his threat.

Still, her courage was not broken, and she stared at him questioningly.

"Hyer's ther facts," continued Bob of the Kenyon.

"This hyer Brander made a cache an' cleaned out, bein' hard up fur grub, and loosin' his burro, which skipped when feed run short. Thar's a party comes back, sayin' the'r' lookin' fur him; an' they strike right fur w'ar' thet cache war' made. Be they lookin' fur him, er be they lookin' fur ther gold he hid thar'? Ef they know this much, don't they know ther rest? You tell us what he did with that same gold an' then light out."

"Knowing so much about it you should be the one to do the tellin'. As for us, we were not aware of there being any gold to cache, and we would hardly take your word for it."

Her scorn did not leave a mark on the face of Kenyon Bob, though from the men at his shoulders there came ominous growls. They did not all have the patience of their leader.

He answered slowly.

"This ain't ther place ter be puttin' on frills, an' you want ter git right down ter business ef you don't mean ter pass in yer checks. First off, who is in yer gang? Don't make no mistakes about the sayin' ov it, either."

There was no reason in the mind of Marion why she should not explain exactly who her companions had been, and she checked off the list without hesitation. At a farther question she also explained how it came that the two women

were alone and so easy a prey for the bandits.

"A man by ther name ov Primrose," repeated Kenyon Bob, uneasily.

"Mebbe some time you heard him called Bedrock?"

"He called himself Uncle Bedrock, though why I do not know."

"That's him," said the leader, turning to his men.

"Ther blamed old cuss ain't movin' without thar's big money behind it, an' ef he ain't a side pard ov ther chap we're wantin' he's pullin' ther strings ter suit his game, an' knows 'em all by name. Ef he's gone floatin' down ther sink-hole, like ez not he's took his secret with him."

"I tell you he had no secret. He knew nothing more than I told him, and what everybody at Paradise heard. Had I not insisted he would never have come nigh this point. If you men know nothing of Brander we have no farther use for each other. Leave me to carry out my search. We will not linger here once day breaks."

She spoke with the positiveness of truth and made a mistake in doing so. If she knew more than Bedrock, then she was worth more to them until they could be certain that knowledge had nothing to do with the lost cache.

"Ef so be thet you're the boss ov the outfit we won't weep because old Bedrock has gone up, er, rather, gone down ther flume. He come snookin' round after his regular fresh style and caught lead. Curse him, afore he went he give me this."

He held up a hand that was bandaged with a cloth on which the blood stains were thick.

It had been his hand from which Bedrock had shot the torch.

Evidently the thought was that the bullet which was fired just as Primrose lost his hold on the rock had struck him, and that his body had been carried on down the underground stream.

And as to Travers, the outlaw seemed to think he had probably shared the same fate. He added something of the kind, and Marion, who clasped the hand of Linda Lyle in her own, could feel it quiver in her grasp.

It began to look as though they were very much alone. As a guide Harold would not be apt to be much of a success, and even if they could escape from these men their position would be one of danger.

With a courage that was something like obstinacy, Mrs. Mowrey attempted once more to make the best of a bad bargain.

She drew herself up coolly.

"You are only throwing away the little chance you have of making anything out of your capture. I can swear to you that we know nothing about the matters of which you talk, and our sole desire here is to find a man who is wanted for various reasons. We have no wealth with us of which we can be robbed, and so far nothing has been done which cannot be overlooked if you choose to come to terms. If the men are lost, as you claim, we can do nothing of ourselves; but if we can procure your assistance I can at least promise you a reasonable reward in a reasonable time. Can we not come to terms?"

"As how?"

"I will guarantee you five thousand dollars within two weeks after Hugh Brander is found if you assist in the search, and five hundred each for Bedrock and Travers, if they are living, to be paid in the same time after they arrive safely at Paradise. If neither of these objects can be accomplished, I offer a thousand if you place the three of us remaining safe in Paradise."

It was a fair offer, but the answer to it was a harsh laugh.

"Thar' ain't a man hyer that would go within twenty mile ov Paradise fur yer five thousand. Thar' ain't a man hyer thet would lose his sheer ov that cache fur twice ther sum. An' ef we hed Brander, ez you call him, I reckon he

would jest hev' ter pass in his chips an' be done with it. Ye'r tryin' ter buy us off ther trail—an' we ain't ter be bo't. Not short ov ther 'hull' secret. Kin you give it?"

"For the last time I tell you we know nothing of any cache."

"Then hyer's ther last word. Weemin are bad mederein' in a camp like our'n, an' ef yer can't talk, down ther sunk stream yer goes, ter jine Bedrock."

There was a murmur among the men; but it was not at the cold-blooded proposition.

At the first sound of dissent the hand of Kenyon Bob dropped to his belt.

"Yer thinks she kin speak ef she wants to—I don't. Ef thar's ary one wants ter arg'y it, let him step out. Ef thar's ary two, er ther 'hull' lot, fur that matter. I'm rummin' this gang, an' what I says goes."

He glared around, stern faced and savage, waiting for an answer.

Crippled as he was in one hand, he may not have been anxious to force a fight, but he did not mean to let the first sign of mutiny pass unnoticed, and at the challenge the murmur ceased.

"Dead men tell no tales, an' dead weemin are ther only kind ov female thet don't jabber. Ef they kin p'int out ther cache, make what barg'in yer wants. Ef they can't, I'm boss, an' I say, down they go!"

Marion and her friend at last realized that they stood face to face with death.

CHAPTER XXXI.

STEMWINDER SAUL LEADS THE WAY.

"What infernal idiocy was this, anyway?"

The speaker was Stemwinder Saul, who turned almost savagely upon the Flying Dude.

"Mrs. Mowrey had ample warning as to the folly of this journey and its danger. Bedrock should have cautioned her against it. You should have kept her back by main force."

"I d-d-did the b-b-best I could. Weally."

In rather a doleful key did Harold pitch his answer.

"Of course you did, and I suppose there is no sense in blaming you, after all. A willful woman must have her own way, and all mankind must suffer for it, along with the lady herself."

"B-b-but what has happened to her?"

"Kenyon Bob has happened to her, unless I am wofully mistaken; and anything worse than he and his gang would be hard to find."

"B-b-but who are they?"

"An outfit to which Captain Hurt and his road-agents are regular little angels. There is not a man among them on whose head a price is not set; and not one of them could be in a civilized community ten minutes without having another totted up against him. They are on the trail of gold here, though how they hit it I don't know. I tell you this so there may be no nonsense when you meet them. Shoot quick, and to kill, no matter what the odds. Never surrender, for that means a worse death. Now, no more talk. We must see if there is any hope. Have your pistols ready, and be ready at a signal to follow me."

"Lead on. I'm weady."

Saul, the Stemwinder, did not hesitate.

He advanced with confidence to the edge of the barranca, and exactly at the spot where the outlaws had emerged, when coming to the capture of Marion and her friend.

In his right hand he held a coiled rope which had been hanging to his saddle, and his revolvers were ready.

"Wait here until you get my signal; and watch the path I take. I must go ahead for a little, and spy out the land."

With this caution he slipped over the bank and began the descent of the precipitous path.

It was certain that comparatively but a few moments had elapsed since the ladies had been spirited away, and it was

that fact which gave Saul the more confidence.

He was satisfied the work had been the work of a few, or he would have found at least a sentinel on the upper ground.

Probably there had been but two of the outlaws, and they had escorted the prisoners to headquarters, leaving the path unguarded, with the thought that it would not be discovered before they could return.

Only certain knowledge of his own emboldened him to risk it himself, and it would have been a long time before Harold would have ventured to essay its descent unless he had the outlaws in plain view.

He followed the path for some little distance and then halted, flattening himself against the rock, until, in the gloom, he was altogether invisible against the sky overhead. He heard the sound of cautious steps along the path.

Fortunately, the trend of the path was to the left, and this allowed his right hand to swing free.

He felt of the rope he carried, to make sure the noose was in running order, and then held himself in readiness for a cast. He could see nothing, but his hearing did double duty, and it seemed to him that he could locate the approaching man to an inch.

It was not a position to favor a long throw, yet it was not advisable to allow the man to come too near. At the right moment Saul gave his lariat a quick flit, which sent the noose sailing out and downward.

Then there was a deft jerk, which tightened the noose, and the Stemwinder retreated hastily up the path, towing the fellow he had looped after him at a rate that kept his legs moving, while he clawed vainly at the rope.

The loop had caught fairly around his throat and thus cut off the warning cry he would have otherwise given, and the fellow was at least cool-headed enough to know that a blind struggle at that point would be apt to end in his being dashed down to the rocks beneath.

Had his knife been close to his hand he might perhaps have cut the rope, but before his grip had found it, Saul had reached the plain and was running out from the barranca, careless whether the feet of his prisoner left the trail or not. As the fellow came struggling up out of the gash in the ground, Mowrey sprang upon him like a tiger, and with his grasp holding him down, Saul came back to finish his capture.

Harold's fingers had closed around the brawny throat, just above the rope, and between the two the life was being about choked out of the captive by the time Saul had bound his hands and twisted a gag into his mouth.

"No use to question him; he's not of the give-away kind without more pressure than we have time to put on him. Only thing to do is to leave him here in shape that he can't get away. By rights we ought to chuck him overboard, but I always did have too much mercy for my own good. It is ten to one that he clears the way as far as we want to go, and we'll gamble on those chances. Follow."

They left the man lying on the plain, looking up at the stars. There was little use to attempt to hide him, and Saul knew well what danger there was in delay. This time he ran down the rude path with more haste, and Mowrey followed him with a recklessness which at another time would have excited his wonder.

Saul guessed shrewdly that the outlaws of the barranca knew the size of the party which had approached their lurking places, and that but one remained above out of the half dozen.

Of that one they would have but little fear, and the single sentinel would probably be relied on to watch, and perhaps slay, him.

That would leave the way open for a lodgment in the underground recesses of this singular refuge. After that, Saul felt he would be ready for whatever might happen, and if the bandits could

be taken at a disadvantage, he felt he could rely on his own skill with his weapons and wits, to say nothing of the luck and pluck of Mowrey.

Once or twice Saul halted to make sure that Harold could follow, and finally he caught the young man by the hand.

"Be as silent as the grave until the time comes, and then be as loud and deadly as you can. I believe we are near them now. Keep close at my shoulder. Here we dive into their recesses."

He turned into what seemed but a crevice in the rock, and Mowrey, placing a hand on his shoulder, followed close at his heels.

In a zigzag way wound the path, and before they had taken many steps they could hear the sound of voices. Just at that moment Kenyon Bob was laying down the law to his men, and Marion was stolidly awaiting her fate.

"If there is a chance, look after Linda, and I will save the other," whispered Saul, and the next instant he was peering into the room where the semblance of a court had been going on.

"I know nothing of the cache," Marion was repeating.

"More than that, so far as Hugh Brander is concerned, I do not believe there is one."

"Then lead 'em away. We hev' no use fur 'em hyer."

Kenyon Bob waved his bandaged hand, the two men stepped forward, while the outlaw captain stepped with them.

The presence of the intruders was not suspected, and Saul, with a revolver in his hand, was coolly waiting for his chance. It was too soon to open the ball, for, from where he stood, he could not draw a fair bead on the men he wished to strike first of all.

Linda Lyle had fully as much courage as Marion, but she was younger and it was of a different kind.

So far she had kept a masterly silence, and her face had not blanched, though it seemed to her she was looking at the prospect of soon and certain death.

Now the time had come to act, and if Mrs. Mowrey intended to passively accept her fate, she did not.

With a great leap she darted from the fingers which were outstretched to grasp her, and bounded by chance toward the place where her two friends were lurking.

For her it was the movement of all others to make, but in one way it was a disadvantage.

She was directly in line with Marion, or almost so, as well as with the bandits. For an instant she shielded them from the revolvers of Stenwinder Saul. Only the man who followed her came within safe range, and he dropped to a single shot.

As the light from the muzzle of Saul's revolver flamed out from the shadows a cry arose from the outlaws, who grasped their arms; but Kenyon Bob moved most promptly of all.

With a tigerish spring he caught at the neck of Marion with his free fingers, while with the bandaged hand he managed to draw his knife, which he held above her back.

"Halt, thar', whoever yer be!" he shouted.

"Another step, or another shot, an' this hyer blade goes home!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

BEDROCK TO THE RESCUE.

Bedrock, having once found a spot which seemed reasonably safe, had no idea of remaining in it a moment longer than was necessary.

The water dripped away from his clothing and ran down the rock in a little stream, and while it ran he crouched in his position, listening to any sound that might reach him from without.

It struck him that the search would not be very vigorous, and that these men believed he had gone down the stream, and his companion with him.

"Think I got a lead shaft sunk in me, an' I'm a dear departed. Jest let 'em keep

on a thunkin' an' they'll hev' another chance ter loan me a quarter afore ther war's over."

So, chuckling to himself, he arose slowly, and finding there was plenty of head room, shook himself, and began to search his pockets, which, by the way, were generally in a better state of preservation than his outside wardrobe.

He was always ready for just such an emergency, and at the first trial drew out a waterproof box containing matches and tapers.

The light he could throw on his surroundings was not very brilliant, but, for one as Argus-eyed as he, it was sufficient.

A few steps brought him into a square chamber, not altogether empty of trash and driftwood, while at one end there was something which looked like a dark line of shadow, but which he knew at first sight was a passage leading further on.

Knowing the utility of husbanding his resources, he sought out some bits of greasewood which would furnish him with material for a torch, and these he lighted.

The passage, when he entered it, led little farther inward, but extended upward, and though the stairway was of the rudest kind, he found no difficulty in advancing until progress was stopped by a slab of stone, which fitted into the passage too much like a door to be anything else.

He examined it with care, and then, hearing from the other side a muffled report, like that of a pistol, leaned all his weight against the rock and pushed.

It was only an experiment, and a doubtful one, but it succeeded.

By chance he had applied his force at exactly the right spot, and the stone slab tilted back, revealing an opening into the room beyond, and a scene that was enough to delight his heart.

There was business going on, and he had a loud call to be part of the concern that looked like going to the wall.

It only took a glance.

His quick eyes sought out his friends, and the situation showed him what was to be done. Between him and Bob of the Kenyon were half a dozen of the outlaws, while beyond he saw Saul hesitating, his revolver dropping after a sudden check, and Linda and the Flying Dude just vanishing.

Once before, this night, Bedrock had marked the leader of the bandits.

Now his hand flew up with an equal promptness, though the shot was more delicate to make.

There was no time to linger on his aim, for it could not be told how long Stenwinder Saul could be held at bay, or how soon the knife of the ruffian would come down. His pistol cracked as it came to a level, and Kenyon Bob reeled back, the knife dropping from his grasp.

Then Primrose gave a whoop which rang through the room, and sprang forward, striking with the clubbed butts of his revolvers as he came within reaching distance, though half a dozen shots were fired, some at random, and some at him.

In the confusion which centered around Marion, he was afraid to shoot, since there was no telling what instant she might be thrown into the line of his bullets.

It seemed as though it was putting him at a disadvantage, but it was not in reality so. For the time being a blow counted almost as much as a ball, and he was saving his ammunition. Two or three men went down, or staggered back, while from the other side of the crowd Stenwinder Saul pushed his way forward.

"Shoulder ter shoulder, pard, an' ther girl behind our kiver. Go slow an' make et sure. When we git 'em in ther box we'll make a clean-up thet yer reads ov."

As Bedrock spoke he caught the shrinking form of Marion, and with a side spring carried her out of the throng to where he had a wall at his back, while at almost the same moment Kenyon Bob, though hard hit, was shouting:

"Alive, men! Take 'em alive ef yer wants ter find ther cache!"

With a harsh laugh Saul sprang forward. Bedrock had done the one thing he wanted. He had Marion out of his way, and it seemed as though there was nothing

now to fear. At least, no chance shot of his could now hurt her. With skill and coolness he felt he could have more than a living chance with them all, and clear the way for their escape.

His pistols had already spoken once, when he felt a sharp twinge in his left shoulder, and at the same time some one dashed out the light, and left the place in worse than Egyptian darkness.

"Skip!" shouted Bedrock, as the lights went out, but Stenwinder Saul gave no answer.

It seemed to him that a dozen men had fallen on him in a mass, seizing him from every side and bearing him down by sheer weight and numbers.

They rolled over and over, the revolvers were wrenched from his grip, and though he was fighting desperately luck was going the other way.

Saul uttered no sound.

It was all part of the day's work, and if he was left to fight it out alone, Bedrock was doing his duty, which, first of all, was to provide for the safety of the woman. With such odds against the two it was not safe for her to remain there while the war was fought out to the bitter end.

Bedrock had one advantage, of which he was making the most.

No one knew how he had entered the cave room, and if there was any thought about it among the bandits it was that he had come with Saul, and flanked their position, or that he had all along been lurking in the shadows.

Bob of the Kenyon, doubly wounded though he was, had recovered his wits, and though his one arm was shattered and useless from the smashing wound where Bedrock's second ball went through flesh and bone, he grasped a weapon with his other hand and staggered to the opening through which the Stenwinder had entered.

A little beyond he could stand in the dim light of the barranca and mark down their enemy if he came that way.

He was certain that as yet neither Marion nor her rescuers had escaped.

There was where he was mistaken.

For all his personal recklessness, Primrose was a careful soul when a woman was concerned, and the moment the place was involved in darkness he took advantage of it.

"Notter word," he whispered into Marion's ear.

"Saul kin hold 'em level tell I kin git 'round to him ag'in, an' ef he cain't it ain't your put in. I'll straighten out ther tangle when I git back. Notter whimper."

As he whispered his warning into her ear, Bedrock caught up Mrs. Mowrey, flung her over his shoulder, and guiding his steps by the wall, made his way toward the hidden door through which he had made his entrance.

He found it without trouble or interruption, and fortunately the way was still open.

Hastily he explained to her the situation of things below, and putting into her hands a few matches and tapers, told her of the driftwood to be found below.

Then he wrung her hand, caught up the extinguished torch he had flung down at the threshold, and entering the room once more, closed the door of rock behind him.

He could see nothing, but not far away he could hear the savage snarl of men engaged in a hand-to-hand struggle.

There was one man there against a dozen, but he seemed to be holding his own remarkably well, and had at least one advantage of which he was making the most. No matter in what direction he struck, if he hit any one it must be a foe, while the other side was hampered by the fact that a wound given was almost sure to be a wound received.

"Reckon I better not show a glim arter all," thought Primrose, as he coolly crept nearer to the fray.

"Jest skurmush 'roun' on ther edges, an' put in a pelt whar' it'll do ther most good."

On his hands and knees he carefully advanced, now and then feeling for a victim, and at last he found one.

He caught some one by the ankle, and with a sweeping pull drew him out of the

melee from which he seemed to be already willing to retire.

No resistance was offered to the jerk which Bedrock gave, but when it ceased the movement went on. With a motion like that of a trained acrobat, the man, having suddenly kicked his limbs loose, threw a forespring that carried him well out of reach and brought him up erect.

At the same time a man came rushing in, waving a torch.

By the light thus suddenly thrown upon the scene, Primrose saw facing him his late capture, and it was Stenwinder Saul.

The recognition was mutual.

"Marion?" asked Saul, with a gasp.

"All right, up to ther peresent time; an' now's our chainece ter travel."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WHAT MARION SAW.

Marion stole silently down the stairway of stone, guided by the light of the little taper.

She was trembling with excitement, and yet was cool. She shrank from following the directions which Bedrock had hastily given her, and yet she was full of courage. Had she seen how she could help by her presence she would even have gone back to the room she had lately left.

She understood, however, that she was an element of weakness by her presence, and she had confidence in the courage of the two men, and that in some way they would extricate not only themselves but her from the snare into which they had fallen.

It never struck her that face to face with each other there might not be so much odds in favor of the bandits of the barranca as appeared on the surface. The two were, in fact, a little army, and so far the luck had seemed wonderfully on their side.

Bedrock had told her, however, to seek the little alcove by the side of the stream, and wait for them there; at least, as long as she could endure it, promising her succor before daylight came again.

She had no trouble about her foothold, and the way seemed open; but as she came near to the bottom of the stairway she halted suddenly.

There was some one near, for she heard the murmur of voices, scarcely raised above a whisper.

Instinctively she extinguished the candle which she carried, and stood bent forward in an attitude of listening.

There was a change to be made in the programme without a doubt.

For a time she hesitated whether to advance or retreat.

It was impossible her friends could have reached the spot by this time, and the chances were that these were foes, yet she wanted to be sure.

With stealthy steps she finally advanced toward a faint light which she saw beyond.

The passage which she was in continued in darkness, and she could see nothing in the room beyond, but she heard a voice distinctly pronounce:

"Et's hyer, er hyerabouts, ef et's at all."

There was a momentary silence, followed by the sound of trash being cast aside. Curiosity was beginning to awaken in Marion, and she crept along toward the end of the passage.

The whispering continued to sink lower as the murmur went on again. Whatever the intruders were after, they believed in caution, and as near to silence as they could come.

These men were not of the outlaws from whom she had just escaped, or they would not take such precautions to keep their presence from being known, and it suddenly struck her that one of them might be Travers. If it should so prove she felt that she could trust herself with them, but she did not intend to make any sign until it was a certainty.

She drew nearer and nearer until, at last, stooping low down so that she could the better escape chance observation, she peered into the vault-like little room.

Two men were there, but at first sight they were strangers to her, though had Harold been in her place he would have

recognized them on the instant. They were Addison Lane—as he was known in Paradise—and Jake Jukes.

They were turning over the pile of drift in the one corner with an eagerness that showed they were hoping to find something of importance.

She watched them coolly, satisfied that for a time at least it was not likely she would be observed, and satisfied that it would take close looking for them to notice her, even if they were on guard.

Presently a thrill went through her as she began to believe there was something a trifle familiar in the turn of the back of the man nearest to her.

She was not certain, but the thought came to her that this was the leader of the little party they had seen go past them on the first day out from Paradise. If so, it was Jack Lyle, and what more likely than that they were searching for the grave of Hugh Brander? For the moment she forgot all about the cache, and was almost tempted to announce herself, and assist in the search.

Prudence restrained her, and soon she was well satisfied that it had done so.

The last bit of rubbish had been scratched away, and she heard an exclamation break from the lips of the gambler. Jukes was digging away with the point of his knife, and between them they raised up a slab of stone.

"Ah!" exclaimed the gambler, in an accent of delight.

"Win or lose on the other game, this pays for the trouble of it all. Jukes, there's half a dozen grubstakes in this for you, and—"

He looked once more into the cavity they had disclosed, and then up at his companion.

Jukes was not satisfied to gaze. He thrust his hands down into the opening, bending lower as he growled out:

"Grubstakes, nothin'. Wages don't pay fur a find like this. Didn't I reesk my life a follerin' what might be er trail, an' ag'in mightn't? Ain't I done all I war' paid ter do, an' this bersides? Et's halves, pard; et's halves. An' mighty lib'ral I am when I say et."

Then Marion knew they had found the cache.

It seemed a liberal thing to Jukes, but it would have been better for him if he had looked up. He would have seen that Uncle Jack was thinking after another fashion.

What is enough for two is seldom sufficient for one, and the gambler blood in the man here known as Ad Lane was all at boiling heat.

Jukes was tearing at the treasure they had unearthed, bringing up the nuggets one by one, to weigh them mechanically while he stared down at the greater bulk below, hoping that it would practically have no end.

It was a temptation for which he was ready to meet all—and fall. Back over his shoulder Lane gave one furtive glance, as though espial could come from that direction alone, and then his hand shot to a revolver in his belt, while his eyes glowed with a murderous light.

They had built a little fire close to the spot where the rubbish had rested, and its low glare lit up the face, the side of which was turned toward Mrs. Mowrey. She saw there all the murderous resolve which lay behind the motion, and gave a little, gasping cry.

A second sooner, and that cry might have had its effect, and Jake Jukes have been spared, but it came that second too late, for, as it rose in the darkness the finger of Jack Lyle tightened on the trigger, and Jake fell back.

Nevertheless, above the roar of his revolver, Lyle had heard that feeble, half-suppressed exclamation, and turned, as on a pivot, throwing his pistol hand forward, while he cocked the weapon in the same motion.

His glance rested on the black line which marked the passage, but did not at once take in Marion, crouching in her old position, with the rigid look of one petrified with horror.

But as his gaze dropped downward he saw a white face limned against the black background, a face he did not remember

to have seen before, but which he believed he would never forget, for it seemed as though its look of horror was frozen there, and would remain forever.

That, to him, at this moment, was nothing. His action had been seen, and he knew now that henceforth he would not be the hunter, but the hunted. With this witness living, sooner or later he would feel the vengeance of the law.

Steadily, as though on practice parade, he raised his hand, and the muzzle of his revolver was just tilting down to rest on his mark, when a man suddenly leaped upon him from behind, knocking the revolver from his grasp as he came, and almost with the same motion seizing him by neck and thigh.

At his best few men could have handled him after this fashion, but Lane was not at his best. Some men would have still been in bed, nursing the bullet wound the Flying Dude had given him.

The hurt of itself was not dangerous, but it had taken much of the steel out of him.

The excitement of the past few moments, under such circumstances, had told strongly on him, and then, at the instant of the attack, a terror shot through him, which was more than half superstitious. He fancied it was the dead man who attacked him.

Little chance, though, did he have for resistance.

With that grip upon him, the rest followed along as quickly as one could follow the movements of the assailant.

Over his hip the latter twisted the feebly-struggling man, and down upon the ground he crushed him, adding his weight to the fall.

Marion did not wait to see the end of the conflict.

The same thought which had paralyzed Lyle filled her with a wild terror. Whether this was the dying flurry or only the despairing rush of a wounded man, who was fighting like a wild beast for his life, she believed it was Jake Jukes who was on the carpet for vengeance, and she could neither help nor witness, since, whichever way came the end, a scoundrel would triumph. She fell back, turned, and fled hastily through the midnight darkness of the stairway till stopped by the upper door.

Against this she beat with her bruised hands, and tried her feeble strength.

The slab seemed immovable, and on the other side all was silence. Were her friends defeated and dead, and was she here at the mercy of the outlaws on either side, and, worst of all, alone?

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A LATE RECOGNITION.

Though Bedrock could not see the marks with any plainness, Stenwinder Saul had not come out of the late fracas unscathed.

In the struggle in the darkness he had been struck more than once; his clothing had been torn, and, worst of all, his revolvers had been forced from his grasp, and now lay somewhere unseen on the rocky floor.

He was not altogether weaponless, however, and perhaps was more terrible now than before. In the one hand he grasped a derringer, with which he felt he had one life absolutely in his control. In the other hand was a bowie knife.

Saul was capable of doing a good deal of damage yet, but the advice of Bedrock agreed with his own ideas very well, and he did not hesitate.

"Correct you are! Lead the way—or shall I?"

For answer Primrose took a snap shot at the man who carried the torch, and, as the brand dropped to the floor, he caught the arm of the Stenwinder and hurried him away.

The coming of the light had been of more advantage to the two than to the dozen, because by it Bedrock had been able to find his man, while the momentary glance in its direction, given by the outlaws, took their eyes away from the very spot where they should have rested.

With a cool head it was not hard to find the spot for which Bedrock was searching; but one thing he had overlooked; he had closed the door behind

Marion, and it was not so certain he could reopen it from this side.

There was an angry snarling among the wolves, who had, at least for the moment, been balked of their prey, but it did not reach to where Marion was leaning in horrible suspense.

As chance had largely decided her movements of late, so it decided them once more, and at a critical moment.

Suddenly, how or why Marion knew not, the slab rolled back and she stumbled forward into the room.

There was there the calm which precedes the storm.

Once more the torches lit up the scene, and this time the whole of it was brought out in clear relief.

Stemwinder Saul and Bedrock, side by side, were facing the crowd, and on the other side Bob of the Kenyon, who had come back to aid, was saying his last say.

"Las' time ov askin'!" he was shouting.

"Yer orter knowed thet ef we didn't think we could make a barg'in w'uth while fur both ov us you'd b'in dead afore this. Throw up yer han's an' give us a sure tip an' we'll let yer off with er sound hide. Try ter bark an' we'll bite yer, dead!"

Bob was hot on the scent of the cache, and was willing to promise the earth to win the treasure they had been vainly looking for. He kept his men in check as few could have done, under the circumstances, but the pistol in his uninjured hand was covering Saul, and it seemed as though when he once made up his mind that the end was at hand, the two pards must drop. Half a dozen other weapons were trained with an aim fully as deadly.

The two were as cool as the coolest. With numbers all against them, and those numbers the pick of the band of desperadoes, they were in no haste about attempting to break the momentary truce. Something might happen to turn the situation, however slightly, in their favor. As it was now, it was an absolute certainty that if a volley was fired, one or both would go down—probably both.

"Think et over," continued Bob; "but don't take too long er thinkin'. We got yer, sure, an' we'll roust out ther weemin. Ef we can't git ye'r secret outen you, we'll hev' et outen them; go your lives on thet!"

"Weally!"

Harold Mowrey had come again.

This time he was not alone.

As he entered he slipped to one side, and half a dozen or more men rushed in after him, with the missing Edwards at their head.

"Hands up yourselves! We have you v—v—vewy foul!" he called out.

His words were drowned in an explosion of firearms. His first exclamation had shown there was a new factor in the game, and before his last ones were uttered the conflict was joined; and it was done so swiftly and so surely on the part of the newcomers that the whole thing came in the nature of an overwhelming surprise.

A sudden panic seized the outlaws of the barranca, and with Kenyon Bob at their head, all turned and fled. At least those of them who were able to retreat did so, and those who were not lay where they fell.

The torches had been thrown down, but now they were caught up again before their flames had time to die away, and Edwards and the men who came with him would have followed on the heels of the fugitives had they not been halted by a sharp order.

Looking around they saw, near the open doorway through which the two had just entered, Marion, with Charley Travers supporting her.

"Steady, you there! Let them go if they will. The enemy is flying, and I only wish I could build a bridge for them. Are the horses safe?"

"Safe enough!" answered Edwards, coming forward.

"There's three of the boys with them, and they know their business. It was lucky I found the crowd, and luckier yet that we got here in time. We wouldn't have made the rifle if it had not been for our friend here in the long hair. Any one hurt?"

"Nothing to worry about. Look out that Bob and his gang don't come back, and three of you follow. Go slow with your shooting; there's a man there I want alive."

As he spoke he turned and darted into the passage, with Bedrock at his shoulder, and the three men coming close in his rear.

It was not on account of the men whom he had left behind when he ran to the scene of the conflict that Charley Travers wanted the guards, but to see that there was no interruption from the side of the canyon and stream.

Ad Lane was apparently having a comfortable time under the ministrations of the man who had so savagely attacked him just after the shooting of Jukes—and that man was Morrison. He turned at the sound of the coming footsteps, and sprang to his feet with ready weapons.

Bedrock, recognizing him on sight, gave a reassuring hail.

"Eli got thar, eh! And so did Jack Morrison. Putt 'er thar', pard. Putt 'er thar'!"

He advanced with outstretched hand, and Morrison, as quick to comprehend, took a step to meet him.

The movement was in one respect unfortunate.

He had succeeded in tying the hands of Ad Lane, and he fancied his captive would keep.

There was where he made his mistake. Released from Morrison's weight and immediate oversight, Lane suddenly recovered his powers and his prudence. This was no place for him to linger.

He gathered all his energies for a break, and suddenly shot up and away. There was but one way he could have been stopped, and that was the one Travers had decided should not be taken. Before any one could get near him, he had reached the outer cave, and, all fettered at the wrists as he was, he plunged boldly into the stream.

He was certainly a powerful swimmer, for he managed to make good headway and was almost immediately lost to view, the torch which one of the men had caught up doing little to light up the darkness into which he plunged.

There was no pursuit. The likelihood of stumbling into the hands of some of Kenyon Bob's men was too great.

A guard of two was left at the water's edge, and Travers and the rest turned back. As they passed through the room where lay the body of Jake Jukes, had they only known where to look they might have noticed that some one had kicked a little pile of trash over the excavation wherein lay the buried gold. Morrison glanced that way, but the rest went on as if unconscious. Even Bedrock, who usually knew more than a little bit about everything, had no suggestions to make as to why Jake Jukes had passed over the great divide.

Now that the battle was over Linda came creeping down the rugged path and rushed to the side of Marion, over whom Stemwinder Saul was bending with an anxious look on his face.

It cleared away shortly, however. Mrs. Mowrey had been touched sharply by a bullet, but it was only through the fleshy part of the upper arm, and was little likely to do more than temporary damage to the limb.

The sport bound it up with the touch and precision of a surgeon, and looked up with a sigh, to meet the keen eyes of Travers fixed upon him.

"Well, sport, we have the whip hand of them, for the present, but there is no telling how long it will last. What is it all about, anyhow?"

Saul nodded, as he answered:

"I'm not sure you can prove it by me. These ladies thought they had a mission

in the desert and started out for a journey. How they got here I know not, but evidently they fell in with thieves."

"And you fell in with them, and then the circus commenced. We can just guess how it all was. The sooner we are lighting out of here the better it will be for all hands concerned. If you have ever heard anything about that gang you know they are hard to shake off when they strike a trail which they think worth the running."

"The sooner these ladies are on the back track the better. I warned them of the folly and danger of the trip, but they did not choose to heed me. Perhaps they will take advice now."

"And you? What are you going to do? Don't believe the climate agrees with your health any better than that of the rest."

"Excuse me, but I have a mission here myself, and one the late unpleasantness makes it more necessary than ever that I attend to."

"It is to find Hugh Brander!" exclaimed Marion, who had been listening keenly in spite of the trouble with her arm.

"I know you are upon his trail; though I begin to fear now that we have come too late, and that he has perished. That villain, who left him alone on the desert to die, did his work only too well."

She ceased speaking suddenly, remembering that, unless she had greatly erred, that same villain himself lay dead not so far away.

Travers took up the conversation.

"No, use, old man. All this is very interesting, but you can't mystify me. I'm going to make you a fair offer, to help you squarely out of the soup, and go you halves. I did think once I'd finish you off and scoop the whole thing myself; but, since I get to know you all better, I feel a shade more liberal. What do you say to the offer? Take it or leave it."

Saul gave a troubled look at the speaker. Hi Edwards and the men he had brought with him were all stationed without hearing distance, and before those who were near it seemed safe to speak frankly.

"Who are you?" he asked, barely scenting at that moment a mystery with which the reader has all along been acquainted.

Travers shrugged his shoulders, after his way; and then Bedrock chipped in:

"I ain't so sure ov him, bein' ez his face war' onfamilyer; but ef thar' ain't a feller out thar' I've heard called ther deacon I'm a howlin' pervaricator. An' fur a clean guess at ther size ov ye'r hand I'd say thet ther boys calls yer Captain Hurt, an' thet yer runs ther tollgate ther other side ov Paradise."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE FINDING OF HUGH BRANDER.

"Right you are for a dollar," answered the individual until now known as Charley Travers.

"You are the man for a suggestion, and there's not to be much of a mistake about it when you make one. Now, what are you all going to do about it?"

"If we have your word," spoke up Marion, rising and looking keenly at the captain, "we are going to trust you."

"And if you don't?"

There was mockery in the tone, and Mrs. Mowrey shrank back a trifle, leaving it to the Stemwinder to answer.

He darted an angry glance at the brazen-faced outlaw.

"You ought to know how it will be when it comes to war. I have you covered now."

His derringer was hidden in his hand, but the muzzle was pointed suggestively.

"Of course I know how you think it will be; and of course I know a good deal more about you than you think I do. I could even mention the name you sailed under the other side of the mountains. Shall I name it?"

"If you choose There has been too much of this mystery, and I am ready to end it."

"You think it's an open secret, do you? Perhaps it is. Bedrock, you tell. I'd like to hear how it sounds."

Primrose had been watching the pair, but he did not look particularly puzzled.

"I hev' made mistakes in my time, but I don't jest fancy I'm makin' ov 'em much in my declinin' years, er thet I'm fur off when I say yer thet same identickie lost sheep what we're all surposed ter be huntin'. Ef et ain't ther fust letter ov yer name orter be—Hugh Brander."

An exclamation from two or three pairs of lips told that the revelation had not been expected by all, and Marion was the most thunderstricken of the party.

She gazed up into the face of the man with absolute fright, waiting to hear the announcement confirmed or denied.

"Well, what of it? If I hid myself away it was because I did not want to be found, and I would hardly be likely to proclaim my real name from the house-tops."

"But to your friends?" gasped Marion, staring up at the face which had seemed so totally strange.

"Pity that a few months in the West, and a trifling makeup, should so far alter me that those same friends did not know me. I suppose I have cut loose at an awful rate; but then, it was always in me. I knew a heap of things in the old days, but just then it was profitable to try to know something else."

Marion, for the present, had nothing more to say.

She looked at the man who had once been her husband, and wondered how it was that, in spite of his disguise, she had never recognized him.

He used, in her eyes, to be a handsome man; she was not sure but that she liked his looks better as he was now—rough, bluff, and a man with a record.

"All very interesting," said Travers, with a wave of the hand; "but meantime, brother Brander, I am waiting for an answer to my proposition. What is it to be?"

"Who are you?" again asked Brander. "The name Captain Hurt tells me nothing; and, so far, you have said nothing, whether you are friend or foe. If I understand you aright, it is a little fortune you are asking for—one large enough to be worth the fighting for."

"By the time it gets around to me I'm not so sure it will be. There will be half a dozen of my men to pay off, and as I will probably want to retire from active business, I am afraid the interest of my investment will not be enough to keep me out of mischief. Decidedly, I ought to go for the whole thing, not for a part."

The speaker was thoughtful in manner, and so far avoided answering the question in which more than one of the listeners was interested.

A singular change had come over the voice of this singular individual, and Marion began to think there were to be yet further revelations.

"You have not answered!" she persisted. "Is it because you dare not?"

"Oh, I dare do anything. After saying I was Captain Hurt there is hardly a deeper depth of confidence into which I can take you. If you must know it, however, I am the woman who came between; I am the unworthy sister—or, rather, half-sister—of this distinguished paladin, Hugh Brander! I am sorry to say he and I have not always been of one mind, and, though I see things in a little different light from what I once did, there was a time when I swore vengeance—and I rather think I got a taste of it. I say, Hugh, do you know me now?"

"I have had a suspicion before, and I would hardly doubt you now," was answered by the paladin.

"There can be no war on my side; and if you choose to speak for it you can have peace. In the past I only did what I thought was my duty. I had thought that, for the future, we would have dropped out of each other's lives altogether."

Marion listened in wonder.

"You his sister?" she said, staring at the masculine, but handsome face which laughed down on her from over the male habiliments. "Then you are the woman known as Lola. What harm had he ever done you that you should wreck two lives to make up for it?"

"Only killed the man I fancied I was in love with. Oh, it was all done in regular manner, according to the code; but, with a master hand like Hugh at the weapons, what chance had poor Charley? Better drop it! I always had a vivid imagination, and once get me started and I may reconsider my determinations."

"He was a villain!" asseverated Brander, hotly; "and I have no regrets; neither at this late day do I believe that you have. Let it be forgotten. As to the cache, concerning which you have spoken, let it be as you say. We will divide it. If Jukes had not played me false he would have been richer than he knew of, and I would have had it safe enough where it could be handled, while all this would have been saved. Perhaps it is better as it is."

"All right, then. We're not out of the woods, by a long chalk. Kenyon Bob may have something to say about our going."

"L—l—let's g—g—go down and shoot him," suggested Harold, for the first time lifting up his voice. It was in order for him to say something, and that was the most amiable suggestion he could think of.

"I suspect that Kenyon Bob is dead," interrupted Edwards, coming forward from where he had been listening to the last few sentences. "They started up the barranca, with an eye to flanking us, I guess, and a man went running up from the water that is down there. A little after there was a smash like a double barreled earthquake, and I think, between them, they must have sprung the trap the Dude was talking about."

"Are you sure they were under it?"

Brander's sister spoke as coolly as though there were no matters of life and death involved in the question.

"Not dead sure until we see what got out on the other side; but there are only a leg or two, and a matter of a few arms; sticking out on this. Some of the boys crept up to investigate. As the last man under the deadfall carried a torch that stuck out of the ruins, they got a glimpse of the scene. There's tons of rock down, and all around, the thing worked as well as they could have hoped for when they set it."

"Lane did better work than he counted on, if that is the case. It will turn the rout into a panic; but I suppose we will have a fight for it in the morning. It's time to reinforce the men above. We'll hold the fort for the night, and start on the back track shortly after daybreak. We've found what we were looking for, and there is no use to linger. Better see about giving the horses water, if they need it. You can have it carried up in the nosebags."

The captain spoke in the most matter of fact way, and Edwards, after the same fashion, went away to obey orders.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

CAPT. HURT GOES OUT OF BUSINESS.

"And how, in the name of wonder, did you happen to be here?"

Morrison had been as much astonished at the unmasking as any of the rest.

He had listened, digested, and then went away, whistling softly. There was much yet to be said and explained, but it would keep. After a while he came back to Saul and was greeted by the query.

It was not hard to answer.

"It's quite a little story, and I guess, for the present, I'll cut it short."

"Oh, I can imagine the most of it. What surprised me was to find you on the ground, here, right when you were wanted."

"Simple as dirt. You started in to keep the one outfit in view; I kept an eye on the other. I didn't have to hurry, be-

cause I knew about where they would pull up at, and until that time, as long as I was sure of the trail, I just wanted to keep comfortably out of sight.

"I closed up on them at the right time, and strolled in, large as life, with my hands on my revolvers, when Jukes was playing the theater over a body he declared was that of his late pard.

"I wasn't fooled on it, neither was Lyle nor Lane, or whatever you chose to call him. Not even a little bit we weren't. Lane might have been willing to be if I hadn't shown up, but the facts were too glaring."

"They couldn't well run me out of camp, and so I hung on and lay low till I heard a bit of private conversation which perhaps they thought I didn't understand. Then I made it convenient to say good-by in a silent fashion, which, I think, was very much to their satisfaction. Jukes, having thought the matter over, had told the truth as he knew it, and revealed the fact that, after deserting you, he struck you again—that you had, without a doubt, a cache in the barranca here, but he was afraid to venture in alone to the spot from which he saw you emerge."

"He had hard enough time as it was on that trip, and was taken with something of a fever. He had fallen into the hands of a couple of bandits of the plains, and I wouldn't be surprised if then was the time he gave himself away, though he thought he didn't. That was what brought Kenyon Bob on the ground, though he didn't have a very straight tip."

"Well, I followed the outfit, and they came to the barranca along about dark. Fortunately, they waited a few hours, which gave me my chance."

"When Lane and Jukes dropped down by a rope, without saying anything to anybody, I followed after, and got there a trifle late to save poor Jake. The rest came along as you know it, and I suppose to-morrow we will be on the back trail rejoicing. But it's straight goods that you are wanted back in civilization; and now that you have a chance to square things with that late wife of yours I suspect you will only be too willing to go."

"Can they be squared, though?" asked Brander, gloomily. "If I had been wise and told her the whole complication at first, I can see she would have been apt to stand by me. Now I am afraid it is too late. How can I ask her to stay with me through all the rakings over of those old charges, which even now I doubt if I can disprove?"

"Disprove nothing! The charges will be against the other fellow; and a lady would hardly want to put twenty or thirty thousand dollars into the affair unless she was willing to throw herself along with it. Begin your courting over again," urged Morrison, "and good luck go with you! I'm the man who ought to be unforgiving. To think of your playing a game like this on me! Of course, if I had known more of you in the past it wouldn't have worked, but that is nothing here nor there."

The conversation occurred when Morrison and the man he had known as Stemwinder Saul had a chance to speak a few words to themselves. There were plenty of other things of importance to talk over, but, somehow, this came first of all, and it served to relieve a little the nerves of the two, which were more or less affected by the strained nature of the remarkable situation.

It is not worth while to give in detail what followed. There was little rest for any one that night, and every one talked to every one else, more or less, before daylight dawned. Brander told how he had twice before visited these regions, and twice before had been balked in bringing in the marvelous pocket which he had found in the hills beyond.

Under the circumstances some men would have failed of coming in with life itself.

He told Marion some other things in regard to this reckless half-sister of his.

which, as he had admitted, would have been better told before marriage; and made plain that it was as much his inability to fight her when she was on his trail, flaming with wrath, as the complications that brought about the charge of embezzlement, which drove him away.

He touched but lightly on the earlier friendship with Jack Lyle, for whom, at one time, he would have vouched with his life, and explained the circumstances under which the life insurance had been placed which afterwards came near to working his death.

And, having told all this, and more, he was shrewd enough to see that if Marion had not altogether forgiven, she had not forgotten those things he would most desire her to remember. So he began to have a decided hope for the future, and to pray fervently for the time when they would be safely back from the desert, and he could speak of certain other things which were on his mind.

Anyhow, the daylight came, and after that the hour for the march. Iola, in her masculine garb, was as cool and wary as the best of them, and held her grip on her men with as firm a hand as ever. They did not know much about the cache, or the terms on which it was divided, but they understood that, for the present, they were at peace with an element of society which generally gave them war to the knife; and thus things went along without friction.

The combined forces made quite a respectable body, and though they saw in the distance what they took to be the remnants of the bandits of the barranca, no trouble was experienced from them, nor was anything seen of the forces of Ad Lane, who was supposed to be on the other side of the gash on the plain. They evidently followed back the route by which they had come when they found two of their number were missing, for they turned up in Paradise.

A day or so after Hugh Brander and a little party of five departed from Paradise with their faces turned eastward.

Linda Lyle was of that party. For a day or two she was sad-faced and silent, since she could not help thinking of Uncle Jack, and the grave which held him, back in the bed of the barranca.

After that she brightened up wonderfully, and when Harold Mowrey whispered a certain interesting communication in her ear she stared him in the face, and answered him, with his own almost inimitable drawl:

"Weally!"

Nevertheless, it is to be supposed that she subsequently qualified it by another monosyllable—yes—since subsequent information induces the belief that she became Mrs. Mowrey at the same time that Marion, for the second time, became Mrs. Brander.

Iola drifted out of view at about the time Captain Hurt, the first, retired from the toll-gatherer's profession. As a daring, reckless woman, it seems strange she has not been again heard from; but between the gold she brought in from the desert, and other moneys she had accumulated, it may be that she has turned over a new leaf. Who can tell?

THE END.

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